CHAPTER -V
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When we make an assessment of the social progress we cannot ignore the role played by women in any society. It would be rather impossible to discuss the past, the present and the future of humanity without taking into consideration the position of women in a given society. But the contribution of women towards society remains to a great extent unrecognized. From ages and ages women suffer inequalities under different pretext. But the root of it all starts with patriarchy and the internalization of these patriarchal norms by women themselves. The traditional role assigned to women in Indian society has restricted their mobility to a great extent. In Hindu tradition, though women have been considered to be the prime source of strength as reflected in the mythology and oral history in the society, in practice lot of prejudices stands in the way of treating them as equal to men. Now the question is whether the situation is any different in the tribal settings where matrilineal set up prevails? With their household economic system, practice of shifting cultivation, the land holding pattern and egalitarian ethos, the society does not suffer any prejudice against women. Particularly the matrilineal system protects, to a large extent the position of women in society. But scholars like Caroline Marak maintains that there is subjugation of women. Actual power rests with the males and the mahari. Although women inherit the parental property, actual control over it remains with the husband (NOKNA) or the maternal uncle or the mahari. Although we do not encounter instances of dowry deaths or female infanticide among the tribal population in our states which was rampant in the other states of India, here we see women enjoy relative autonomy as far as her movement is concerned. Womenfolk here are independent economically particularly matrilineal tribes like the Garos. But we can not overlook the fact that the discrimination of different nature is encountered here. Women are neither allowed to head administrative position of her village or neither town nor she is allowed to take lead in ritualistic ceremonies. It is said
that prejudices of many types are prevalent among Garo people as well. Let us 
now discuss some of the Garo tales and try to find out how women are 
represented in the tales and thereby to have an understanding of the role and 
status of Garo women.

5.1 WOMEN BEYOND HER GENDER ROLES

The stereotype notion of women in the service of men is questioned or 
defied by women in tales. Although women can hardly become successful in 
challenging male domination and are forced to observe values and norms of 
patriarchal society but in tales we find some women trying to break the chain and 
reduce the gender imbalance. Here women try to exercise freedom of choice, 
whereby they present a mind of their own.

5.1.1 Mithdeibesa and Jinnee

In older days there was a big village. Once there born a child 
who became an extra-ordinary member of the Shangma matri-phratry. 
His parents were a conscientious couple, comparatively well off, and 
always managing to keep in easy circumstances. He was the 7th child in 
the family but all the six born before him died in their infancy. Later 
another boy and a girl were born. The parents loved the trio dearly. 
When the girl came of age, she was married to a splendid young man of 
the Marak matri-phratry of the tribe. She continued to be the heir of the 
house in conformity with the matrilineal usage of the tribe.

From his early boy hood this 7th child was very fond of 
sacrificial ceremonies and ritual performances. He would often listen 
with profound interest to the devotional chants and prayers, the wild and 
mystic strains and invocations of the Achik priests to the Unseen Deity, 
known as Mithdei. Because of his outstanding interest in religious 
matters his parents called him Mithdeibesa, which means “the Friend of 
the Deity”.

Mithdeibesa was not subject to fierce passions. He eschewed the 
excesses of youth and turned to contemplation for comfort. He became 
immersed in the world of thought and spirituality. He was a silent and

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1. Rongmathu, 1960 : 54-60
Barkataki, 1970:218-22
Holdesh N.Sangma
reserved youth and soon began to show complete indifference to the world and its ordinary conventions. His mind was inquisitive and analytical. He ardently reasoned out everything that came within his ken.

With age Mithdeibesa became even more reserved, solitary and contemplative. His parents were quite alarmed at his unusual behaviour. So when he reached the age of 27, they got him married to a beautiful and accomplished girl of the Marak sect. It was their secret hope that the stern realities of married life would change him into a practical man of the world. Mithdeibesa was never lacking in conjugal happiness: but his attention was constantly fixed on the mysteries of birth and death, pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow. Occasional reprimands from his wife had little effect in making him give up his pensive mood.

With the passing years thoughtful Mithdeibesa became more solitary and silent than ever. Often in the midst of his profound meditations he lost sight of himself, his wife and children. He loved his children dearly; but the humdrum of home life with all its ties galled him. There was no solace in worldly life which to him was stale and unprofitable. Homely engagement proved a great impediment to his life-long desire of devoting himself to spiritual things. Therefore he decided to leave his wife and children. But before leaving he labored hard to accumulate enough food, cloth and other supplies to last for his wife and children for a long time to come.

Once in his ascetic life, in the purple dimness of the tropical night, he seemed to see a shadowy, ghost-like figure coming towards him. It was a colossal figure of a hairy, wild looking man. The colossal man was the materialized figure of a benign spirit known as Jinnee. The spirit was one of the immortals. It could make itself visible or invisible to human beings at will. It never willingly harmed any human being, but bore kindly thoughts towards mankind as a whole. Jinnee provided Mithdeibesa food and told him,

"I come to help thee. Not only can I bring the messages and things from the remotest places in no time but I can at once transport thee invisible wherever thou desire to go. I can make thee visible to thy fellow at thy sweet will."

Mithdeibesa then desired to see his relations, family and friends once more but himself remaining invisible. Immediately the spirit bodily
transported him to his former home. He found his wife remarried to another man and muttered:

"It is her carnal desire that urged to seek that husband or the combined creative urge of man and woman that brought them together. It's natural!" Next, he saw that his children were all well and happy, thus preferred to leave them undisturbed.

One day three men from Mithideibesa's village happened to meet him in the forest. Although an anchorite Mithdeibesa was not a misanthropist (general dislike of people). With the help of Jinnee he arranged for their food and shelter.

Once while discussing on ultimate realities, Mithdeibesa felt a great change taking place within himself. He realized that his body was but a particle of dust in the self acting whole. He asked Jinnee, "are there any other people who have forsaken home, wife and children in search of Truth as I have done?" And when Mithdeibesa wanted to know where they dwell and what do they do? And expressed desire to go there, Jinnee immediately took him to the wonderful solitary caves in the great Chuma Mountains.

During my field visit in the Pilingkata area of Kamrup (Metro), Holdesh N. Sangma while talking on the story told that the Garos believe in spirit like Jinnee with special power. He also said that Mithdeibesa could accept his wife's second marriage after he left her as natural because he did not have any interest in family life or material life. No doubt for a little while he thought over it and murmured within himself that it might have happened as the result of her carnal desire or liking between both man and woman. But he admitted it as natural. This fact did not bother him much as he was more interested in understanding the mysteries of the world. He himself preferred a secluded life. Since family life was creating an impediment to his Quest of truth and greater realities of life, he accepted her marriage liberally. In a way he was relieved to see her as well as her children happily settled. Sangma also said in this connection that Garo society is quite liberal in accepting second marriage and widow marriage in the absence of the husband/wife. Here women enjoy comparatively better freedom regarding her life. Mithdeibesa did not criticize his wife's act of marrying as immoral. This is in one way a reflection on his broader mind and also can be understood as a
reflection of a comparatively better status enjoyed by Garo woman under matrilineal set up.

Marriage is believed to be a corrective measure in society. Bringing a woman in a man’s life is traditionally believed to bring responsibility and order in him. Thus Mithdeibesa was married to an accomplished girl. But the wife used to rebuke him getting dissatisfied at his ways i.e. unworldly behaviour.

5.1.2 Kari (salt)

There was a Garo (Achik) family. They were very rich. They had two daughters. One day the father wanted to know how much his daughters loved him. So he asked his daughters about their love for him. The elder one said she loves him like sugar. But the younger daughter said that she loves him as salt. The father got offended by her comparison. Immediately the mahari decided to throw her out of her house as they found her answer not at all acceptable. Unhappy at her state she moved towards a forest alone and helpless. In the forest while she was crying helplessly, a king was passing by with his attendants. He noticed this beautiful but lonely girl. When the king asked her the reason of her sadness, she narrated her story. Hearing her sad plight, the king took her along with him to his palace. He decided to marry her. After their marriage a big feast was organized in honour of the new Queen. Everyone was invited including the family and relatives of the new Queen.

Everyone from her family came. The Queen strictly instructed the Kitchen staff that her relatives should be given food items without salt. They were treated with every possible kind of sweet items. Now it is not possible to eat only sweet items. This irked her family so much that they called their daughter who is now the Queen and complained about this. She humbly said that it was according to their wish that she did not give them anything salty. Hearing her words everyone realized their mistake and asked for her forgiveness.

Similar tale like this is discussed by Kirin Narayan in Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon (pp189-192). Urmilaji, the story teller told a similar kind of story to Narayan while her visit to Kangra. Narayan opined that that the father’s question, testing his daughter’s love, hints at an over involved,
possessive relationship. Urmilaji, however, underplayed the King's possibly incestuous possessiveness. Rather it was the public opinion that turned against the princess in the Kangra tale for frankly describing her emotion. Holdesh N. Sangma also, while narrating the tale downplayed the over involvement of the father or his possessive feeling for the daughter. He said that since he did not like her answer or her answer went against his expectation it was their mahari which decided to throw her out of the house. But since the girl was honest and innocent she could prove her point to be right at the end of the tale. The girl's intention was never to hurt her father's emotion. She simply voiced her opinion frankly. And the family also realized their mistake and all of them got united at the end. Like Urmilaji he also stressed the fact that too much of sweet is not acceptable and gives rise to distaste. Salt is equally important and is required. Thus the girl has won the battle proving her answer to be right by deed. Its not always sugar that is sweet sometimes salt is even sweeter. She was rewarded as she was not at all wrong. "A person can't eat too much sugar, even though it's a very lovable thing". She faced trouble as she failed to live up to her father's expectation as she answered the way she felt it right rather than pleasing her father with her answer.

5.1.3 The Two Doves and the Two Brothers

Among the Achiks (Garos), there lived in the olden days a very wealthy man at a village. This man dwelt there with his wife, mother-in-law and four daughters. The first two girls were both beautiful and accomplished. The younger ones were infants.

The man's mother in law was a cruel old woman who had little love for her grand daughters. She hated Awil and Singwil especially for their beauty for she herself was as ugly as any old hag could be. So she used to get the two girls into trouble whenever she could. Once she secretly mixed husk and charcoal with the rice which Awil and Singwil husked. She would put hair or rat dung into the rice which they had cooked and throw sand into the water which they had drawn for drinking. In this way she managed to get her grand daughters punished by their mother on many occasions.

3. Rongmathu, 1960:71-78
Barkataki, 1970:230-236
One day the mother asked them to take down some paddy from the granary and to thresh it with feet, dry it in the sun and pound it. Along with it she also asked them to fetch water from the river and cook rice for the entire family’s meal before leaving for jhum field. Awil and Singwil did accordingly and took their younger sisters for a bath in the river. Before going they asked their grandmother to look after the paddy while they were gone. When they were away in the river the cruel old woman concealed the paddy which was spread out in the court yard to dry and when they returned told them that the paddy was eaten up by the pig and the capon. When their mother returned the cruel grand mother spoke up and said that the negligent girls had allowed a pig and a capon to eat up the paddy and that the two mischievous sisters took down more paddies from the granary in order to deceive their mother. The mother, instigated by the grand mother, beat the girls so unmercifully that they both fainted.

Again on another day in the absence of the father the old woman falsely accused Awil and Singwil of further wrong doing. Again their mother beat them very severely and locked them up. But they managed to free themselves with the help of a boy. Singwil went to the fowl house to collect feathers and Awil killed her father’s pet capon and cooked it while carefully preserving the feathers. After finishing their meal Awil said to Singwil: “why should we continue to remain here where we receive nothing but beatings and abuses. Let us stick these feathers to our bodies with wax, turn ourselves into doves and fly away from this wretched place”. Singwil agreed and turned themselves into doves and fly away from this wretched place.”

As doves they used to sing their stories to their mother and father. The father heard their voices and was much troubled in mind. He hurried home and found his wife and two younger daughters weeping for the missing elder sisters. He too began to weep. The mother admitted her fault and agreed to amend her ways. She requested the daughters to leave dove-shapes and become human being once more. She told them that they were frequently beaten on account of their grand mother’s wickedness. That had ended as she was found out and promised that they won’t be beaten any more.
But the doves would not return. Instead they said, "If you really love us, hang up two necklaces on a bamboo pole". The parents did so immediately and the two doves picked the ornaments and fled away.

A few days later the two doves fell in the trap laid down by the two brothers named Anal and Gunal. Awil was caught in the trap of the elder brother Anal and Singwil was caught in the trap of Gunal. Anal killed his dove, cooked it and ate it up. But Gunal took his dove and put it in a cage and took good care of it. One day when both the brothers left the house for their *jhum* field, the dove flew out of the cage and turned herself into a beautiful girl. She cleaned the house, swept the floor, drew water, cooked rice, and then returned to her former shape. Both the brothers after returning home from the day's hard work were surprised to find the house in good order and their evening meal all cooked and waiting for them. The same thing kept on repeating everyday, compelling them to find out the reason. Anal tried to find out the reason but could not keep himself awake so failed in his mission. But Gunal solved the mystery successfully and discovered the girl. When one day she was performing her regular activities, Gunal swiftly leaped out of his hiding place, seizes her up by the wrist and soon both of them married.

Singwil was exquisitely beautiful. So Anal grew very jealous of his brother who married her and wanted to kill him so that he could marry the girl himself. Thus one day he asked Gunal to catch crabs and *nahchi* fish. As Gunal entered the hole, Anal leaped up, burying big stones into the opening and covered his brother with them. Returning home he informed Singwil that "I tried to bring Gunal back; but he said that he wished to go away. He asked me to tell you not to worry about him; but that you may take another husband if you wish". But at that moment Irija Ganggaja, Gunal's faithful dog who had witnessed the murderous act, came wailing to Singwil and reported to her what happened. Both of them went out to search for Gunal and rescued and brought him back to life. Again one day, Anal asked him to climb up a *simul* (a large jungle tree) tree and bring a bird's nest. When he was on top, Anal prayed to Tattara Rabuga (owner of breath, father of life) to end his life and his breath be cut off by raising the tree to the skies. The tree suddenly sprang up and Anal hoped that Gunal would fall from the tree and be killed. Again the dog informed Singwil and she rushed to the spot. But the distraught wife could not find way of bringing her husband down. For full seven days and seven nights she stayed at the spot...
sobbing bitterly at Gunal's plight and her own helplessness. She prayed everyone for help but finally Rema gengga Toajeng Abiljong, the patriarchal head of the golden backed woodpeckers, soared into the skies and brought Gunal down on its beak. Singwil took her husband home and nursed him back to health.

Again Anal pushed him into the roaring fire, heaped logs of dried wood on him and went home. Gunal's dog rushed back to his mistress and told her of the fate of the husband. Singwil took an iron rod, a mat and a fan as before, went to the fire, pulled her husband out of the flames and again besought Tattara Rabuga to restore him to life. Her prayer was heard a second time and Gunal was brought back to life once more.

Now Gunal lost all his patience and decided that he needs to put an end to his brother's mischief-making or else he might kill him some day. So for his own safety, he killed Anal and after that Gunal and Singwil lived happily ever after.

In this Garo folktale we find women are very active in the plot of the story. The father who stays in the mother-in-laws house according to Garo tradition, does not have much to say or do except working with the wife in the Jhum field or going out to the market. The grandmother in the tale had little love for her grand daughters. She was cruel and hated these two girls because of their beauty as she herself was ugly to look at. So to take revenge on them she used to get these girls to difficult situations. Jealousy is typically associated with women and in folktales we see jealousy of women to women-jealousy between co wives, stepsisters, daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, sister and sister-in-laws for different reasons. Here we see grandmother being jealous of the grand daughters and the reason behind jealousy is their beauty. Grandmother as the matriarch of the Garo family, the most influential person in the family system, used all her power and capacity to influence her daughter against the grand daughters. She is an active agent, an instigator, who takes the plot forward. Women are prominently present in this tale. Garos being matriloc and matrilineal the woman inherits the parental property and her place is not dislocated. She lives in her familiar atmosphere. It is the husband who moves to the wife's house after marriage, not the woman as it happens in the patriarchal system. As a result she
is psychologically secured, living in a congenial and intimate atmosphere among her own people. Thus women enjoy better power and authority by virtue of inheriting property and thus they are active. In this tale also it was the mother who beats the daughters as instigated by the grand mother, not the father. Here we see that the father had a secondary existence. We see women in different roles- as instigator (grand mother), taking action (mother punishing daughters), taking decision (changing to doves in order to protest against undue torture) as life saver (Singwil).

The two girls had the courage to take a decision-not to bear the torture anymore. To fulfill their decision they turned themselves into two doves, beyond the reach of their family members. This is their protest which can be seen as resistance. When the mother realized their mistake it was already too late. They refused to come back. Before leaving they demanded necklaces for them and took it away. This fact shows women’s attachment to jewellery from time immemorial.

Next we see that the dove, when alone turned into a beautiful girl and performed all the household activities- cleaning, sweeping, drawing water, cooking food, etc. These household duties are so ingrained in woman that she need not be told to do that. Rather she performs it willingly and as her regular duty. After that Singwil and Gunal got married. But this co existence and shifting from bird to human is accepted as natural in folktales without raising any eyebrows. Max Lüthi observed in *The European Folktale* that folktale hero does not hesitate to marry an otherworld bride, whether a fairy, an animal, a swan maiden, or a witch’s daughter. Sometimes these brides possess magical/special power. In this tale also when the two brothers found their home in order, got their meal ready, initially they thought it as the work of some ghost or spirit. But when they found that it was actually a beautiful girl who was a dove caught by the brothers, Gunal did not hesitate to marry her. In folktales characters can easily turn themselves from one thing to another. This shifting and changing is taken as natural.
Kirin Narayan mentioned that the metaphor of girl as bird is well established in Kangra and elsewhere in North India where village exogamy is practiced (Kirin Narayan "Birds on a Branch: Girl Friends and Wedding Songs in Kangra, 1986:47-75). In this tale also the girls turned into doves, unable to bear the torture of their mother and grand mother. As doves they used to sing their stories in front of their parents and parents thus became aware of the reality.

After her marriage with Gunai struggle of another kind started for Singwil. Rift between the two brothers started. Anal became envious of his brother as he married beautiful Singwil. Now he tried every possible trick up his sleeve to kill his brother to get Singwil. But every time she stood as a shield to her husband and came across as a strong character who did not give up under adversity. Rather she fought back and brought him back to life thrice. These incidents showed her love, loyalty and the power of chastity of women. The stereotyping of women has largely revolved around this notion of chastity. From her innate chastity comes the sacred power of the woman, whether she is an unmarried girl or married girl. The power of chastity was to be feared and revered because it could be both boon-giving as well as extremely destructive if threatened. Chastity as power is a recurrent theme that runs through all folkloric texts. Woman as a life giver is what we see in this tale. Thus the conception that women enjoy a better status is reflected here. As a girl Singwil was shown as taking decision along with her sister and then fighting actively for the life of her husband and succeeding in that.

Considering sex roles in Garo households, women not only work in the jhum fields but also do all the household duties. In this tale the mother goes for jhum field and the elder daughters help her in managing household chores.

Female characters have greater competence when women have stronger position in a number of societies with different kinship systems and historical antecedents. Fisher (1956) observed a positive correlation between the competence of female characters and women's status for two matrilineal societies (Truk and Popape) where position of women varies according to the strength of sister-sister relationship. High competence of women in folktales means that they
take the initiative, they play a strong role in decision making, they affect the outcome of action etc. Garos being matrilineal, the women in this Garo tale were found to be active.

5.1.4 *Saora Spora and the Mermaid Queen*\(^4\)

Saora Spora, while strolling about in the jungle, got attracted towards a beautiful mermaid Queen who was plucking and eating the *namikron* fruit on the banks of the *Songdu* River. Eventually Mermaid Queen reciprocated his love and the happy pair reached the underwater caverns and married each other with much fun fare. Saora Spora enjoyed to the full all the wonders and activities which he witnessed in the underwater domain. The celebration over their marriage lasted for full 40 days and 40 nights. Saora Spora could now live under water comfortably and felt perfectly at home there. However one day Saora Spora begged his wife to accompany him on a visit to his maternal relations. She agreed to his proposal readily. Villagers at first were surprised to see him alive as they thought him dead but they all turned out to welcome the couple. But the best food and drink used by human beings were like gall to the Mermaid Queen. She could not enjoy anything given to her. She was not at all comfortable at land. Several days and nights were given to festivity at his village, drinking and merry making in honour of his unexpected return. Meanwhile the Mermaid Queen sat through it all fasting and waiting patiently for her husband to conclude his visit. Immersed in merry making, he had no idea that his wife was starving out of disgust for human food and drink. At last the Mermaid Queen entreated her husband to return to her home with her. He ignored her once again and continued his eating and drinking, asking her to wait a bit longer. Again and again his wife requested him to return to her underwater abode. But an empty headed, full stomached person seldom rightly imagines the pangs, hunger and thirst of another person. However the patient Mermaid remained fasting without raising objections for full 7 days and 7 nights.

Finally, unable to bear any longer the torture her husband was inflicting on her in detaining her indefinitely, the Mermaid Queen departed silently to her watery mansion alone.

\(^4\) Rongmathu, 1960:67-70
Barkataki, 1970:227-230
When the stupefying effect of the wine had passed, Saora Spora went to look for his wife. He tried to reach the underwater world but in vain as he had lost the power of remaining under water indefinitely. In great disappointment he decided to return to his native village. Dejected he sat on a rock by the edge of the pool. His wife saw him and ordered her biggest alligator and longest and largest electric eel to fetch his spirit to her. These two creatures were her servants. They obeyed promptly. The alligator caught hold of Saora Spora by the leg and dragged him into water, and the electric eel coiled about him and lashed him unmercifully. In a few moments Saora Spora was dead. His corpse lay floating on the surface of the pool, but his spirit known as *jachi* was brought by the alligator and the eel to the Mermaid Queen. The *Achiks* say that whenever mermaids desire a man or a woman, they dispatch his or her spirit to their underwater world and leave his or her body afloat as food for alligators, eel and other aquatic animals. Hence when anyone is drowned, the *Achiks* are accustomed to say that he or she has been taken away by a mermaid.

This folk tale speaks of the patience of the Queen in the face of indifference and torture inflicted on her by her unthinking husband who was only concerned about his own enjoyment. He was totally blind about the happiness of his wife. The wife on her part continued to bear all these with a lot of patience, which was expected of a woman in any society. Although her patience was most of the time considered her weakness, the wife was finally compelled to take a decision and leave her husband unwillingly, forced by circumstances, as she cannot possibly starve herself to death. Here is an example of a woman who could take a positive decision in the face of adversity. In her case her patience and love for her husband did not become her weakness which happens with most Indian women. She could break away from the chain of feminine expectation and responsibility which weigh her down so often. But we also have to take into account the fact that she is no ordinary woman, but a mermaid queen possessing supernatural power. In folktales supernatural beings from the other world and ordinary human beings mix side by side and only those women are depicted as somewhat powerful and who have some control over their life.

Sung-Ae Lee argued that in traditional folktales the attributes within the male schema (high esteem, authoritarian, strong, violent, transgressive,
are always deemed superior to their binary opposite in the female schema (low esteem, submissive, beautiful, non-violent, obedient, pleasing, vulnerable, victim/powerless, prize, giver, self-effacing, dependent, passive); the "good" woman conforms to the attributes of the schema for femininity whereas the undesirable woman transgresses them. The alternative possible roles for women—passive victim or monster—reflect how folktale heroines are usually powerless unless they possess a power aligned with monstrosity and evil. This folktale portrays a woman who is powerful possessing supernatural power. She is active thus equated with evil. Through this supernatural power she brought the spirit of her husband to her underwater abode. The Achiks (Garos) say that whenever mermaids desire a man they dispatch his spirit to their underwater world and leave his body afloat as food for alligators, eels, and other aquatic animals. Although she possesses many attributes of the feminine schema by accompanying her husband to his village leaving behind her comfort zone, waiting patiently for her husband's return etc, but the moment she decided to shed her passive image, and left alone to her own world she became active and thus a transgressor and finally an undesirable woman. Women cannot usurp the position of control in the marriage for which she was condemned to hell. A wife has to be submissive, husband-pleasing cooks who should be uncritical and above all silent.

The traditional subjection of the women is based mostly on the presumed moral superiority of the male. Sonia lee maintained that with this superiority comes responsibility. If the man abuses his rights and acts foolishly his wife will scorn him and if he repudiated his wife for no valid reason and as a result loses her forever. This exactly happened in the tale Saora Spora and the Mermaid Queen, where unable to bear with the injustice and neglect meted towards her by her husband, who was only too busy with his own enjoyment forgetting completely about his responsibility and commitment towards his wife, she left him and thus he loses her.

There exists no invisible bond knitting persons together; rather relationships generally become visible in the form of a gift. Here with the gift of
magical power that Saora Spora received from his wife made him capable of remaining underwater. But the relationships between characters do not create an inner bond but are externalized. Instead of building depth, they contribute to the flat appearance of the whole. Once Saora Spora came out of his underwater abode with his Mermaid wife, he indulged in merry making totally forgetting about the condition of his wife who could not take human food and was starving for seven days and nights. In spite of her continuous pleading he turns a deaf ear to her request of returning to her watery domain. The whole realm of sentiment is absent from folktale characters and as a result they lack psychological depth.

Garos are a matrilineal society where inheritance of property is through female line. Thus compared to patriarchal society women in matrilineal set up enjoy a comparatively better position. This fact is reflected in this Garo tale where power is exercised by the central character of the tale, the Mermaid Queen.

5.1.5 Sammisi Samjanggi (the magic millet)\(^5\)

Khatchi and Indik were both exceedingly beautiful damsels. One day thinking of the magic millet called *Sammisi Samjanggi*, Khatchi made a vow:

“I will marry no man other than the one who will bring it to me, I shall die husbandless”.

*Sammisi Samjanggi* is found in a place the way to which is beset with various temptations, great difficulties, and manifold obstacles. It is eagerly sought after as it is capable of bestowing everlasting life, perpetual youthfulness, great strength, and freedom from fatigue and suffering upon its possessor. It also preserves the body of its owner from decay. Thousands of men who daily quest for the precious fruit, perish on the way to the desired goal. Some are being reborn as lower animals; others are being reincarnated as trees, plants and herbs.

The person who wants to obtain it must go alone and the way is long and torturous. On every step the seeker is tested. Khatchi, in her great desire for possessing the coveted fruit, sent her handsome lover, Dikki, to fetch it for her. He took with him his worthy younger brother, Bandi, and set forth on the perilous journey.

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\(^5\) Rongmathu, 1960:272-273
As the two dauntless heroes passed through subterranean region, they were warmly welcomed and cordially greeted by Ahning Chire Chining Nore, a marvelously bewitching and beautiful woman. She is the guardian of the front door of the first entrance to the notorious pathway leading to the abode of the Samnisi Samjanggi. Her dwelling place is known as the origin of Evil. Here there are no judges, no penalties and punishment for those who commit heinous crimes.

When Dikki and Bandi presented themselves at the gate, the bewitching custodian tried to mislead them. But they refused to comply with her requests because they knew that getting involved with her and her husband would only turn them into ferocious beasts.

But after that nobody knew what had happened to them, as they never came back from their perilous journey. Some thought they were lost, some even hope that they would return one day. Khatchi, the beloved of Dikki and Indik, the beloved of Bandi, became immortal virgins, known as the celestial damsels. They were still waiting for the worthy brothers in the hope that they were alive and would return to them.

Here we see two very beautiful damsels who have strong desire to possess magic millet. In order to fulfill their much cherished desire, they decided that they would only get married to their respective beloveds once they become successful in bringing the said millet to them. Here we see two ambitious women who exercised their right to freedom in deciding their course of life. Khatchi and Indik, in order to get the thing of their desire (magic millet), sent their handsome beloveds for a long and torturous journey where thousands of men perish on the way to desired goal. When they never returned, these two women remained immortal virgins and kept waiting for their lovers to return. Thus they transcend their normal gender roles as submissive women. They pursued their dream and had the strength of character to wait endlessly for the fulfillment of their dream. This shows that although they pursued their dream through their beloveds but they were chaste and loyal to them in their absence. In matrilineal societies like Garos women enjoy relative freedom regarding their life, but values like chastity, loyalty are equally valued as assets in women.
5.1.6 Jereno, the Orphan

Once Upon a time there lived in a village in Achik Asong an orphan boy named Jereng who had lost his parents when he was about 5 years old. He had nobody to turn to for help. So he entered forest himself in search of wild fruit and edible roots. As he penetrated deep into the forest he came upon a tree laden with delicious fruits which he immediately climbed to satisfy his great hunger.

While Jereng was in the tree eating fruits, a pair of terrible cannibals, half men and half tigers, known as the Matchadus came by. They were both hairy and looked violent. They espied the orphan high up in the tree and begged him some of the luscious fruits which he was eating. Jereng vigorously shook the tree causing a shower of fruit to descend near the couple. They failed to partake it. Instead they complained that the fruit had fallen on dirty grounds and was therefore polluted. They asked him to pluck some fruits by his own hand and lower it to them by means of his toes. Promptly the Matchadus seized him by feet, pulled him out of the tree, tied him up in a cage and carried him to their home. Their own son was about the same age as Jereng. Next day Matchadus asked their own child to kill Jereng and cook him for them while leaving for forest. The young Matchadus was looking at Jereng and asked him "we Matchadus are all dark-skinned. You men are fair-skinned. Pray, tell me how you become so". Jereng immediately got a chance to plan for his escape and told him to bathe in boil water. He himself boiled water and poured it on him. The young matchadus died instantly. Jereng hastily clad himself in his victim's clothes and smeared dirty black soot all over his body to resemble the dead boy. Then he cooked the body well for the parents’ meal and as they returned he served them elaborately.

One day Jereng pretended that he was afflicted with great sorrow and tactfully wanted to know about their wealth. The parents in order to make him happy revealed to him all his possessions. Next day when they left the house, the orphan hid all their money, jewels and cloth on the opposite bank of the river. One day the boy who is actually a good swimmer took them to the river bank and asked them the permission to learn swimming. They initially refused but later on reluctantly gave him the permission. Within a short time he reached the

6. Rongmathu, 1960:100-104
other side of the river and divested himself of the clothes of the dead young Matchadus and shouted at them-

"you Matchadus have devoured your own child. I am free and have your wealth and precious cloth". They were at rage but they could do nothing as both of them did not know how to swim. And finally following the wrong advice of the intelligent boy, they got drowned. Jereng with all his possessions wandered away from river side. By and by he came to a cave where python dwelt. He killed the huge snake, skinned the body whole, keeping the head intact, made long one piece bag of the skin into which he put his money, jewel and cloth. At night he himself slipped into the skin to sleep.

The cave in which Jereng concealed himself was near the jhum cultivation of a wealthy man who had two beautiful daughters. One day while the girls were driving away parrots and sparrows from their father’s field, they passed the orphan’s cave. Jereng saw them and fell in love with the younger sister. When the young girl cried out to shoot away the birds, the orphan answered her from inside the python skin; but he remained silent when the other girl shouted. Curiously the younger daughter went into the cave from which the strange sound came and saw Jereng emerging from the python skin.

Jereng was a very handsome young man with black glossy hair and strange muscular body. The girl fell in love with him on the spot. Jereng showed her all his money, jewels and precious cloth and said to her:

"If you want to marry me, hide yourself for several days; if your parents happen to find you, tell them that you want to be married to a python."

After reaching home she did as the orphan had advised. When she was discovered by a servant after a lot of search, she was asked the reason for her unusual behaviour. Then she answered coyly: Because there is a python in a cave near our field that I wish to marry. Pray let me do so."

The parents of the girl were shocked and could not believe this and retorted:

"But darling, you are so beautiful and accomplished. We have been looking for a nice young man to marry you to. Have you lost your
mind that you want to wed a python?” the girl however remained adamant. She even threatened to starve herself to death unless her parents give consent to her marriage to the python. Finally her demand was granted though reluctantly and the younger girl and the python were duly married. Jereng with all his money, jewels and cloth was inside the python skin, no one was aware of the fact except his bride. They were given a separate house to stay. After hearing a loud cry at midnight every one got scared. The father then and there sent some people to find out what has happened. They peeped into the dwelling house and saw a very handsome young man sitting with the young girl and reported everything to the girl’s father. To find out for himself what exactly has happened, he went to the place and with his own eyes witnessed the handsome young man sitting with his daughter prinked with costly necklace. He also noted that the house was full of money, jewels and precious cloth. The father was astonished at this but at the same time he had a feeling of great happiness and contentment. The bride’s elder sister now wanted to get married to a python after witnessing the happiness and fortune of her sister. This time she was wedded to a real python. At midnight on the wedding day the elder sister was heard to utter a loud cry. But this time everyone thought that similar things might have happened to her, so no one went there to find out what was really the matter with her. The next morning they realized that the bride was killed by the python that swallowed her. Immediately the python was killed and the elder daughter’s dead body was found in his stomach.

But the fortunate younger sister decided not to reveal the truth about her husband. Instead she preferred to leave the world guessing and puzzled by the riddle of the difference between her good luck and her sister’s sad misfortune. Later Jereng and his bride lived happily with their children and wealth.

Although this tale is male centered and woman plays a secondary role but her presence is felt even then. Jereng accomplished many adventures, escaped from his captors using his intelligence, became rich, married the girl he wanted and lived happily ever after. But what is striking is the character of the young girl who married the orphan. The young girl of the rich parents wanted to marry a python. The python happened to be a handsome young man, a fact which is only known to her. For the rest of the world the groom was a python. So naturally she went against the wishes of her parents but compelled them to agree to her
proposal of marrying the python. She was an independent woman capable of asserting herself for fulfilling her own desire. Witnessing her happiness and fortune, the elder sister also demanded and got married to a python. But unfortunately for her this python turned out to be a real one and caused her death. But the fortunate sister, never at any point in the tale revealed the secret of her husband. Rather she closely guarded the secret to the extent that she was not bothered about the well being of her own sister, who following her, was actually risking her life. What she meant was her own happiness. She was selfish from that angle, but she did what she wanted to do. And thus qualified as a woman having a mind of her own, one who was active, who was not deterred by emotion. This kind of woman character is rare to find but this became possible because Garo society is matrilineal where women enjoy better status. Among Garos women enjoy better mobility, economic freedom, independence, and also can place their opinion in front of the mahari. Thus this young girl also placed her wish and got it fulfilled. She dared to threaten her parents that if they do not allow her to marry the python then she will starve herself to death. The nubile Garo girl takes the initiative in matrimonial alliances. It is her prerogative to initiate decision making process. In this matter she is helped by the members of her chra (matrilineal kins) in Garo society.

Similar kind of story line is also found there in a Rabha folktale where a girl (own mother died) was married to a python. Difference is that in the Garo Tale the girl willingly, out of her own choice married the python whereas in the Rabha tale where society adheres to patriarchal norms, the girl was given to a python in marriage to keep the promise of the father. Her opinion was not sought and the step mother enjoyed the proceedings anticipating the end of the step daughter. But luckily for her, the python turned out to be a handsome god who gave her love and lavished her with gift and made her happy. Presentation of the same story is different in both the tales as the two societies are different.

Though tales travel and are adopted, some of the tales and motifs are rather fairly old and are closely linked with the modes of life and belief of particular communities. In the words of M.J. Herskovits: “A substantial body of folktales is more than the literary expression of people. It is, in a very real sense,
their ethnography which, if systematized by the student, gives a penetrating picture of their life.” (Herskovits 1949, p.418)

In the Garo tale the girl was active, but in the Rabha tale the girl was submissive and passive, hanging there to obey the dictates of the parents. She was rewarded at the end because she was obedient, self-sacrificing, silent and pleasing much to the satisfaction of the male dominated society. In the Garo tale, the girl was also happy but her happiness depended on her own action, will power, resolve. This is actually a reflection of the Garo society which is matrilineal where women are comparatively better off than the women in the pan Indian scenario. The Rabha girl was waiting patiently and passively, for a change in her destiny.

5.2 WOMEN IN HER NORMATIVE ROLE

The internalization of normative behaviour in the expected line of patriarchal set standard happens through the socialization process. Thus womanhood is confined within the roles of mother, daughter, wife, sister and beloved who are expected to be loving, loyal, Chaste, caring, submissive, patient, passive, obedient, obliging as a norm. Following a gendered division of labour, women and men in a society are not only assigned different roles and responsibilities, but their positioning are also valued differently and placed in rank order. Gender roles that accompany each status consist of realms of responsibility and sets of expectations of women and men in a society. Like the Rabha tales women in the Garo tales are expected to meet the challenges of the roles assigned to them.

5.2.1 Daran and Opsora7 (Daran and the celestial damsel)

A poor, healthy and honest peasant youth named Daran, once went up a clear hill-stream, known as Chibok, in Achik Asong, angling for fresh fish called nahrongs. As Daran angled up the stream alone wading in the beautiful pool flanked on both sides by tall primitive trees, he felt unusually happy and buoyant. His whole being was absorbed in

Barkataki, 1970:212-217
the magnificent glory and grandeur surrounding him. Daran was more anxious to enjoy the woodland beauty than to catch many fish.

As he reached the upper stages of the stream, he stood still to gaze contentedly at this beautiful pool and its rock banks. The young man’s heart almost split with happiness at the loveliness he experienced and understood. The pool seemed to be a fitting abode of fairies, nymphs etc. Daran sat on one of the many rocks and contemplated the peacefulness of the environment.

As he was sitting absorbed in his thought, Daran suddenly became aware of the presence of another person. Suddenly he saw a feminine figure of extraordinary beauty. He was struck dumb. All he could do was to watch with rapture the charming, bewitching maiden who was unaware of his presence. She on her part dived into the water with exquisite gracefulness. She swam with ease in the cool pool, as her tender arms and legs moved with perfect harmony.

The damsel was one of the celestial personages known as Oepsoras. Her name was Juge Balji and her abode was in the ethereal regions. She could move through air as well as could make herself visible or invisible to human beings at her will. While swimming in the pool, she became conscious of the presence of human beings in the form of Daran, but continued to swim.

Daran now is determined to get acquainted with the enchanting girl. He decided to hide her snow-white garment which was kept on the bank. Conscience reproached him for his ungentlemanly behaviour; but he threw caution to the winds in order to get in touch with the irresistible creature. He finally reached the place and snatched the girl’s clothes. No sooner had he done this than he heard a wild shriek from the pool. In a moment the girl was on the shore, clawing at him in a frantic effort to get back her garments and crying out in rage at the youth’s bad behaviour. He smiled as she clawed and struck and scratched him. Unable to release her clothes from his clutch, she finally composed herself and asked him what did he want and why is he doing this?

Daran replied that her beauty has bewitched him and he wanted to marry her. She promised to marry Daran and introduced herself as one of the grand daughters of the Saka Misi Saljong, the ruler of the ethereal regions. Daran promptly gave her back her clothes. They promised to marry each other. The celestial damsel then gave her fiancé a white scarf
and requested him to wear it constantly for it endowed him with the power of floating above the ground and moving through the air on the manes of the wind just as she herself could. The two lovers then wondered about the clouds. All material and earthly cares and anxiety had left him. He now experienced supreme happiness and peacefulness. Shortly after that the damsel and Daran were formally married. They never tasted the joys of life on a carnal plane as mortal beings do. Instead their delights were on a higher spiritual plane. For full seven years the two dwelt together in great peace and joy.

After this period, Daran felt a great longing to see his own mother, father, sister and brother once more. When he expressed his desire in front of his celestial spouse she immediately permitted him to return to his native land but she promised to come back to him after three years at the most. She said that she would come to take him to their celestial home at the end of that stipulated period.

Daran’s family members were extremely happy to see him again after he suddenly disappeared. To his family Daran appeared more like a supernatural than a human being. His voice had changed; his demeanour was noble and dignified, his whole being radiated health, strength and energy, now he was serious, thoughtful, earnest, taciturn and independent.

Daran after some time completely came to himself, shedding away his perplexity, and was happy to be among his family members. With joy he told them of his wonderful experience of the past seven years, of his meeting and marriage with the celestial damsel, of the celestial region, where he had dwelt, of his serene happiness and peace, of his blissful married life, on the unearthly beauty and power of his charming wife. Everyone listened to him but his mother was skeptical. She asked him if he is married where his children and wife are. Daran could not answer that because his love and marriage had been solely on a spiritual plane. But viewed from the earthly plane his was a meaningless tale. His listeners could not comprehend his narrative fully.

Slowly Daran adjusted himself to the worldly way of life. He started appreciating the simple joys and sorrows, the laughter and tears of normal human life once again. Some two years later Daran’s mother engaged a lovely accomplished girl to be his wife. Initially he resisted her glances and smiles but after some time and wooing from her, his heart began to give away. At length he consented to marry her. His...
married life revived in Daran all the physical and sensual appetite for the things of the world from which he had been free for so long. He became a man of the world once more. He was happy in the earthly way. At the end of the third year of his descent to the earth, his celestial wife appeared to him accompanied by three attendants.

One fair morning he was sitting with his wife who was holding their new born baby in her arms. For a while the celestial damsel and her attendants simply floated about the young man and stared at him in wonder. Daran raised his eyes and beheld them. Suddenly there rushed upon him memories of the past joys he knew and cherished. His heart sank in disillusionment when he realized how he had been twisted around an earthly woman’s finger. He realized that what a fool he had been to consent to marry a human being. He loathed himself for that.

He could only see the damsel and her attendants. His earthly wife was totally unaware of the terrible crisis through which her husband was passing. The young man watched the face of his celestial wife. He saw its look of surprise change into sneer of scorn. He realized that his end is near. The celestial damsel still spoke nothing to him. She merely continued to stare at him hard and long. In an instant Daran saw the events of his whole life. He felt he was losing his senses. His soul realizing that it could no longer stand the searching, imperturbable gaze of the damsel, at last cried out in despair: “I am not worthy, I am not worthy. Ah me” . With this horrible cry Daran toppled down dead at the feet of his earthly wife. She could not understand what exactly happened as she could not see the celestial damsel. She shrieked out in horror. None of them could find a sensible explanation for his sudden demise. Everything was shrouded in mystery for them. No one could find the real cause of the great tragedy. The earthly wife of the deceased man did not live long. Soon she died of a broken heart.

Here we encounter three women characters. Daran’s beautiful celestial wife, who possesses supernatural power making her dominate the proceedings in the tale, Daran’s mother who influenced upon him to get married and his earthly wife. Daran’s mother is the one who advised his earthly wife ways to win the heart of Daran which she did follow and could successfully win over him. So we see that in folktales women are only powerful and can dominate men when they possess supernatural power or master black art or magic. Otherwise she has to
Women in the Folktales of the Garos

accept what inevitably falls on her; the way Daran’s wife did, and died of broken heart after her husband’s demise. She remained a passive character who cannot act on her own.

In folktales the human hero acquires supernatural powers only as the results of an encounter with a being whose out worldly nature is explicit. Everyday characters and otherworld characters are thus distinguished in the folktale, as in the legend, but in the folktale these actors stand side by side and freely interact with one another. Everyday folktale characters do not feel that an encounter with an ‘other’ world being is an encounter with an alien dimension. This can be seen in this Garo folktale “Daran and Opsora” where Daran fell in love with a celestial damsel who possesses magical power and can remain visible and invisible at her will. They married and she took him to her celestial abode and also empowered him with magical power for seven years. He lived with his celestial wife happily and comfortably without any confusion or disagreement of any kind. But when he returned to his earthly home, to his ordinary self, there too he adjusted well with his earthly wife.

Folktale hero does not hesitate to marry an ‘other’ world bride, whether a celestial damsel, a fairy or a mermaid queen or a witch or a witch’s daughter who is endowed with magical skills. He notices nothing disturbing about her.

The characters depicted in folktales have no inner life, no environment, no relationship to past or future generations, and no relationship to time. Thus Daran comes back home to his earthly abode, adjusted and got married effortlessly. The past has little bearing on his presence, it is only when his celestial wife made an appearance after 3 years, and he felt a kind of anxiety and died inexplicably without offering a reason to his family. Similarly in the tale “Saora Spora and the Mermaid Queen”, Saora Spora came back to his home and adjusted quickly in his home although he was equally comfortable in his underwater abode. Among the various characters of the folktale there exists no firm, lasting relations. They exist according to the demand of the plot.

The celestial wife, possessing occult power had taken the upper hand in this tale. When she came to earth, to take Daran back she found him married once
again. This was an act of betrayal on Daran’s part. The celestial wife could not forgive him for that and gave him a hard and strong glance full of scorn, something which he could not stand. He could not resist the charm of the earthly bride although initially he tried to resist the temptation. His mother insisted on getting him married and settling down which he could not ignore for long specially when the girl was chosen and guided by her. The ties between a mother and son in South Asia are notoriously intense and Daran could not but listen to his mother.

Daran died quite inexplicably. May be he died of mortification. He was extremely embarrassed in front of his celestial wife (Opsora). It was the fear of the public disclosure of his past which brought his death. He could not stand and face the questions and scorn in the eyes of Opsora, which he could only see. At the same time he did not have an answer to his earthly wife. Torn between the two, he did not know how to face the dilemma.

5.2.2 Raja Abong Noga and his Queen

Raja Abong Noga was once the king of Achikland. There came a time when the land of Achik Asong was smitten with a grievous drought and famine and the plains and hills of Achik Asong became arid deserts incapable of supporting life. The drought lasted for seven long years.

Raja Abong Noga enforced assigned labour on his subjects when they were all hard up for food and drink. He built a huge long machan house on a ridge of the Mongro Hill, over looking the Brig Wari, a deep pool in the Simsong River. For the maintenance of it, he assigned various tasks to different villages in his kingdom. At the end of terrible drought the subjects of Raja Abong Noga revolted against him; for they could no longer remain in the galling subjection in which they were placed in the fair land of Achik Asong.

They first killed his second eldest daughter, then third and the fourth, one by one. After that they attacked his guard and tried to capture the King and the Queen themselves. But Raja Abong Noga and his Queen, Slime Dekka escaped, fled to the top of the Nokrek Hill and settled there.

8. Rongmathu, 1960:08-10
Barkataki, 1970:184-185
This Queen knew little about manual work. She did not even know how to cook rice and curry. As for raising rice, corn, millet and other grains and cereals, it was completely beyond her comprehension. She had a few servants, but they had accompanied the fugitive Queen more out of curiosity than loyalty. They wanted to enjoy themselves at her bewilderment in domestic affairs. So they adroitly teased her in every way and would do nothing to reduce her suffering.

One day the wretched Queen out of sheer necessity begged the servants to instruct her in the art of sewing paddy, millet and corn. They told her that she must partially boil the grains so as to aid them in speedy germination and place them precisely in the earth by means of a wooden dibble. The queen gullibly followed their advice to the very letter and she was completely puzzled when she discovered later that her carefully sown seeds did not germinate.

Again one day she asked the servants how to split the firewood, and her servants answered “we are accustomed to split it over our knees”. The Queen naively followed this treacherous advice and died from the deep wounds she received on her knee while performing the task. Raja Abong Noga’s third daughter, Meje Rani, had an infant daughter. This baby was in the arms of one of Meje Rani’s women servants at the moment when Meje Rani was murdered by her subjects. The murderers wanted to kill Meje Rani’s daughter too but the kind hearted woman servant named Nogang, said to them “no, no, this is my own daughter, not Meje Rani’s. You can not kill her”. The woman servant thus told lies to the murderous subjects as she passionately desired to preserve the precious royal seed. The woman servant carefully nursed and brought up the royal baby who in the course of time grew into a beautiful young girl. This daughter of Meje Rani was called Keme. Keme was ultimately married to Ushung Raja, who was one of the sons of Gobela Magenpa. Nogang clarified the true history of Keme before Gobela Magenpa and his son Ushung.

In this tale we see two women characters, one is the Queen and another is the woman servant. The queen had absolutely no knowledge about household chores. She did not know how to cook rice and curry. As a result she was desperate and did not know how to manage her home. Servants who accompanied her took advantage of her lack of knowledge and finally misled her and wrongly advised her causing death to her. This shows that a woman needs the required
skill to run her house properly. Irrespective of her social position a woman is considered successful and measured as per her skills in managing household duties. It does not matter whether she is a queen or an ordinary woman, because she needs to know all the domestic works well for the smooth functioning of her home. Since the Queen was totally uncomfortable at it, as she did not have the required skills and knowledge she had to suffer bitterly. Thus a woman is judged according to her performance within the four walls of the household.

Again the woman servant who told lies to save the young royal girl child from the clutch of the murderers is an example of woman who has kindness and motherly affection amply in her. Here the woman is seen as a loving and caring figure.

5.2.3 Origin of the Garo Phratries

The tale reveals the overwhelming passionate love of Bohol, one of the descendants of Achik Shangma for the daughter of his mother's younger sister. Bohol openly wanted to marry her and went on wooing her for seven years. But the chaste younger matrilineal sister did not give in to his persuasion. She could never think of committing the sin of incest, which was considered the most abominable sin among her tribe. Because of her firmness of will, she was given the name of Marak, which means the mother who is firm and rigidly chaste. (Ma means mother, and rak means firm or strong).

This tale reaffirms that in any society women's chastity is highly valued and chastity is expected of a woman in the larger Indian context. When it comes to men a big silence is maintained because in our society it is believed that a woman needs to be chaste and loyal in order to protect the integrity of the household. Men are more or less forgiven for the sin or crime they commit. We see here the presence of a strong willed woman.

5.2.4 Mese (the rat)

There was a family of rats in the Achik land. The father was killed in a trap laid down by human being. Now mother and their only

10 Holdesh N. Sangma, 68: Pilingkata, Kamrup
son were living. One day a man laid a trap to catch rats. Experienced mother could sense the danger. To lure rats the man kept a banana inside the trap. The son got interested to lay his hand on it. But the wise mother prohibited him by saying that he would fall in danger and also reminded him how his father got trapped in a similar situation and was killed. For a moment the son pretended as if he is listening to her word of caution. But when the mother slept at night, he came out silently and tried to eat the banana kept inside the trap. Immediately he got locked inside. And finally the inevitable happened as the mother feared and he too got killed. Thus he lost his life for not listening to the wise advice of the mother who had all the experience of life.

Every mother wants to guide her children in the right direction depending on her own knowledge and experience. She always wants a better and secured future for them. Here the son (rat) lost his life as he refused to listen to the advice of the mother. A mother is the best well wisher of her child. The moment a child forgets that he/she falls into trouble. Here the woman failed to protect the child despite her best effort. This can also be seen as a reflection on how male world belittles a woman's knowledge and judgement as inferior to them. This might also be seen as one of the reasons why the mother's advice and word of caution was not taken seriously by the son.

5.2.5 The Staircase to the Moon

Among the Achiks in Achik Asong, there lived in very ancient days a man named Jarang. He had a beautiful wife and a fine looking son still in the early teens. Jarang loved his wife and child more than anything else in life and always tried to please them in every possible way.

One day as he was sitting with his beloved wife and child in the open courtyard of his house they saw the moon appear in all its glory high up in the clear sky. The child was quite thoughtful and watched it closely and finally cried out to his father:

“Oh, that beautiful moon! How I wish I could grasp it in my hands and play with it. Father, please fetch it for me to play with.”

Holdesh N. Sangma, Pilingkata: 2012
The father tried to make him understand that it is not at all possible to fetch the moon and explained to him that moon was far away and there was no solid road for him to travel to get it. But the spoilt child refused to budge and cried incessantly and insisted on having the moon. He even refused food and drink. As a result he grew pale and haggard-looking. Jarang’s wife unable to endure the distressing tantrums of the child any longer, scolded her husband, saying-

“Do you wish the doleful cries of the child should continue till he dies? Surely, had you tried you could have fetched the moon for him. Why not construct a staircase to the moon and drag it here within our reach once and for all.”

Jarang, unable to bear the constant nagging of his wife and persistent crying of his child any longer, ventured out to accomplish the impossible task. Thus with the assistance of his nephew he decided to build the staircase to the moon. For this purpose he gathered enormous quantities of wooden posts and bamboos wherewith to raise the intended structure and piled up the needful material in one place. Jarang got busy in erecting one staircase upon another. At one point Jarang himself started believing that he was now certainly nearing the moon. He shouted from above to his nephew below:

“Bring up bamboos. Bring up bamboos”. His wife and nephew on the ground far below could not catch his words distinctly. To them it sounded as if he was shouting exultantly:

“I’ve got the moon. I’ve got the moon. Hew down the staircase”.

Again and again they listened attentively and the same message seemed to be wafted down. The obedient nephew took up an axe and hewed down the main pillars of enormous structure. Soon it fell with a tremendous crash, propelling Jarang through space to a distant place where he was killed instantaneously. Not finding his fallen body his wife and nephew waited expectantly for many days for him to return bearing triumphantly in his hands the cherished moon. But he did not return. Jarang’s wife and nephew angrily concluded that he had furtively fled to the abode of the moon and the stars. The fallen heap of staircase afterwards became a small range hills.

In Sangma’s version tauntrum creating child was a daughter and he stressed on the unreasonable demand of the daughter as the cause of the tragedy,
but in the version collected by D.S. Ronhmathu, the blame was laid more on the wife who supported the unjustified demand of the son. She was blind in love for her son. The wife was shown as foolish but in the version given by H.N. Sangma, the daughter’s pestering for the ungettable resulted in the father’s demise.

Here we see a happy family, where the husband loved his wife and child more than anything else. His attachment to his family was so much that to please them and to avoid the constant nagging of his wife he ventured out to accomplish the impossible—that is to fetch the moon. Women’s love for children sometimes proves to be harmful and in this tale the mothers over indulgence proved fatal.

The wife was foolish and lacks brain. In most tales women are presented as lacking intelligence and brain, qualities associated with men. As a mother she was so concerned about the well being of her son that she made an unreasonable demand which brings trouble to the man who could not do anything except obeying her to get relief from her constant nagging. In a Garo proverb also we find that women are not respected and thought of as lacking in intelligence as for instance the proverb *Domak wagam gri, michik gisik gri* meaning just as a goat is without teeth, so a woman lacks brain. This view gets reflected in the tale. Thus man can not and must not trust women without bringing misfortune on himself.

5.3 OPPRESSED WOMEN

Manliness in folktales mean complete domination of the women either verbally or brute force. It is regarded as an everyday part of marriage that a husband should threaten his foolish wife with a chiding or if he feels necessary he can even slap or beat her up. Ill treatment of the woman by the husband is accepted by society as well as by the women herself as normal.

5.3.1 Dempo’s Secret

In the tale *Dempo’s Secret*, reference has been made to the practice of polygamy which was allowed in the Garo custom. As a Garo, Dempo was allowed to marry as many wives as he wished but he was happy with his only wife whom he loved dearly. Dempo has a secret and

Goswami,1980:208-212
Barkataki, 1970:223-227
his wife wanted to know his secret. Dempo had a weird gift whereby he could understand the conversations of animals, birds and insects. However this gift could cause his immediate death the moment he divulged it to anyone. One day he was laughing at the conversation between an ass and a bullock. His wife immediately wanted to know why he was laughing. Dempo somehow managed to deceive her by saying that he was laughing in his sleep. Although she kept quiet she was not at all convinced at his reply. Since this thing kept on happening again and again, Dempo's wife smelt something fishy. In order to get his secret out, she began one of her accustomed tantrums, reproaching him bitterly, and accusing him of breach of promise. Not being able to stand his wife's nagging any longer Dempo was ready to divulge the secret to his wife even if it means bringing an end to his life. That night prior to his secret sharing he heard the boastful proclamation of his cock in front of his faithful dog who was very upset at the impending danger to his master's life. The cock was saying-

“What kind of a man is our master anyhow? He must be a jelly-fish to allow himself coerced into death by the impertinence of a woman. Indeed he must be a despicable weaking to be so overruled by a woman. I myself have thirty or forty hens as my wives; and I keep them all under perfect control. They are happy and contended. You see me the epitome of happiness. And our master, being a man, cannot control one measly woman. What kind of a man is he, I repeat? Shameful, disgraceful, obnoxious. Were I he, I would have made her fully aware of the fact that it is none of her business to pry into affairs which do not concern her in the least”. After listening to the cock's speech the dog also came to the conclusion that the good man should not allow himself to be tormented by his wife's importunities. He ought not to permit himself to be henpecked. A sound slap or two from him would have silenced her.

Dempo could overhear every word of their conversation and thus resolved to give his wife the thrashing she rightly deserves. As his wife sat by his side to listen to the secret, his attitude changed and he sternly warned her to be silent, clearly intimating that it was not her business to meddle with his secret. The duped wife, there upon began one of her accustomed tantrums, reproaching him bitterly and accusing him of breach of promise. To drive home his warning Dempo immediately stood up, caught hold of his wife by her hair and thrashed her thoroughly until her aggressive spirit was fully curbed. With pain
and mortification at her disgrace, Dempo's subdued wife solemnly promised not to ask him any more questions regarding his secret. They perfectly reconciled with each other and lived happily ever after.

Knowledge of animal speech is a skill which proves convenient to the heroes of a number of tales. It enables the hero to understand the language of animals. This trait is old and widespread in folklore and mythology. As reconstructed by Aarne, the generalized form of the tale is as follows-

"A snake who wishes to repay a man for a favour teaches him the language of animals, but does so under the condition that he shall never say anything to anyone about it: if he should do so he must die. In his home one day the man hears two animals talking together and their conversation amuses him so that he laughs at it. When his wife sees him laughing when there is apparently nothing to laugh at, she demands to know the cause. The man hesitates to tell her and says that he must die if he should ever tell anybody the reason. The wife, however, insists upon her demand. Finally the man makes up his mind to satisfy the curiosity of his wife, and prepares to die. But just than he chances to hear another animal conversation. The male animal (usually a cock) speaks words of warning about a man who can maintain no discipline in his house, but who is thinking about dying for the sake of his wife. The man takes these words to heart and refuses to betray the secret."

(Folk tale: Stith Thompson; 83)

Both on account of the frequent appearance of this story in the older literary texts of India and because of the stability of the oral variants of India and surroundings countries, there seems little doubt that the tale has been brought into Europe from the East. It appears in such notable Oriental collections as the Ramayana, Jātaka (both the Indian and the Chinese forms), Twenty-Five Tales of a Vampire, the Persian Tuti-Nameh, and Thousand and One Nights. Its presence in medieval Europe is indicated by its appearance in the Gesta Romanorum, in a novella of Morlini and in Straparola's collection of tales. But in spite of this literary background the story has been adopted by the people and has become a part of the repertory of oral tales in almost every country of Europe. It is especially common in Finland and the Baltic states. In the near East and in India it is well established. Beyond India it is known at least in Annam and Java. It is
one of the most popular of all foreign tales which have been taken over by African tribes. (*Folktale*: Stith Thompson, 84)

The story gives us the impression that a wife is to be kept under a man's control and if situation demands she can be beaten to keep her silent. The wise man (here the Cock) knows the female psyche and will act accordingly. It is perfectly acceptable to the society if a woman is slapped or beaten to restore male superiority and command inside the household. The conversation of the cock and the dog represents the male point view which wants to establish male supremacy in the line of patriarchal society. Although Garo society is matrilineal, for all practical purposes it is the man who is the ruler of the family and the household. And a man is expected to have the control over his wife or wives provided he caters to her day today needs. Susan Wadley observes: "*folktales are not necessarily used to teach, but even those told for entertainment often contain biting commentaries on social situations and incorporate and substantiate key cultural beliefs." (Wadley, 2000a:218). The traditional subjection of the woman is based mostly on the presumed moral superiority of the male and not on his physical superiority or his economic power. Tales thus concentrate on moral weaknesses of women, with many faults. A presumed lack of character equates her with a child. Sonia Lee maintained that negative image of women is a product of the male psyche; the women probably identifies with it and accepts without much difficulty this image given to her by male for it comes from the one who possesses power and presumably wisdom. One can hardly analyze the cultural expectations and interactional processes that construct gender inequality without attention to the actions of the members of the dominant group. We must pay close attention to what men do to preserve their power and privilege. Schwalbe et al.:2000, suggested that one process involved is when super ordinate groups effectively "other" those who they want to define as subordinate, creating devalued statuses and expectations for them. The cultural significance attached to male bodies signifies the capacity to dominate, to control, and to elicit deference and such expectations are perhaps at the core of what it means for men to do gender.
Folktales show us flat figures rather than human beings with active inner lives as nowhere is this internal emotional state expressed. Dempo’s wife was bashed up by Dempo to keep her silent and under his control; she showed no psychological distress and conflicts that might arise within her as a result. She was instead depicted as living happily ever after. The tale did not show the woman’s psychological reaction. She was shown as living happily after the bashing she received from her husband as it was perfectly acceptable for a woman to admit the man as the head of his household and master of his wife. If not his virility would be questioned and he would lose the respect of the community. A man beats his wife like a father beats his child-out of necessity. If a wife is stronger in character and smarter than her husband, he will become the laughing stock of the whole village. As he will be ridiculed it is his duty to punish his wife to prove himself and his superiority. Thus the woman cannot but be happy.

5.3.2 The Mother of Salt

There was a dirty looking old woman. Her whole appearance was disgusting but she was a great cook and every dish became delicious under her skillful handling. But she was extremely afraid of water. She never bathed nor washed her hands, feet or face. Her daughter was equally filthy like her. The son in law of the woman enjoyed the dishes of curry, soup and chutney, etc prepared by her. But he felt sick of the layer of dirt in her body as well as his wife. So one day he requested both of them to take a bath to clean themselves. He even lectured them on the virtues of cleanliness, but it had no effect on them. They flatly refused his request. He then again persuaded them to influence, but when that even failed, he decided to use force. It pricked his pride to be disobeyed by mere women. To prove his superiority over them, he roughly dragged both the mother (mother of salt) and the daughter, i.e. his wife (Karitchi) to the river side. On their way Karitchi requested her husband with tears in her eyes, not to act so rashly. In the struggle with him the daughter managed to escape from the clutches of her husband and run away. But the unfortunate mother-in-law could not save herself from the grip of the son-in-law as she was dragged to the river. The daughter of the unfortunate woman cried in vain at the needless cruelty

13. Rongmathu, 1960:227-228
and hardheartedness of her husband. As the mother-in-law was thrown into the water she soon dissolved and vanished completely before his very eyes. The daughter cried inconsolably at the death of her mother and roamed here and there for consolation from trees, plant and herbs. One day the damsel, still weeping, jumped into the water to discover the spirit of the mother of salt. Her congealed tear drops became pearls inside the ocean.

This tale reflects on the cruelty of man towards women. This includes from physical abuse, use of force and ultimately to the extent of killing. Violence against women (both mother-in-law and wife) shows that irrespective of the social order, even in matriarchal societies like Garos, this kind of use of raw physical power is very much common. If we believe that tales reflect the society in some form, as Stephens and McCallum argue (1998) that “traditional stories and folktales have important cultural functions. They serve to initiate audiences into aspects of a social heritage transmitting many of a culture’s central values and assumptions and a body of its shared allusions and experiences”. We see that use of violence against women is legitimizied to prove male superiority. The tales prove that this kind of violence and physical torture is expected from a man and he is not questioned. Tales after tales we get description of male violence in some pretext or other and their conduct was justified. Sonia Lee observed that woman is treated like a child who must be guided and punished if need be.

Ramanujan’s model can be applied to Garo folktales like Dempo’s Secret or Mother of Salt. Garo society is matrilineal where women are believed to enjoy better position. But contrary to the popular belief, some folktales show that there is reversal of a normal order, position or relation. Tales reflect the domination of males and perceived male superiority over womenfolk. In these two tales there is male domination to the extent of using raw physical power against women to make her silent and to keep them under male control. Any kind of assertion by women is not tolerated by the dominant group.

5.4 WOMEN AS TRANSGRESSORS

Women who try to overcome male domination or control through their acts are termed as transgressors and as such their act is considered subversive.
Ramanujan opines that subversion/inversion of a normal order or relation is found in folktales (Dharwadker, 1999). But this subversion is not always conscious on the women’s part. In many cases it might be unconscious or subconscious.

**5.4.1 End of the First Tree**

Every living creature in the whole world came to attend the funeral rites of Susimema Sangkildoma, the goddess who is the common mother of all plants and living beings. On that day Meen Mechik Rongling Tira, the wife of GijaGingbo Ah-igija Chalo Mehsigija, asked her husband to let her go and attend the funeral as well.

Husband Gingbo permitted her to go but said that since every living being would be present at the funeral ceremony she should conduct herself carefully. As he had noticed earlier that she had the tendency of exchanging questionable smiles with Rengra Balsa Sriri Budhi, Manna kanga, Saron Benga, he cautioned her that he did not want her to exchange further smiles or words with them. Moreover she should not spend the night in that place, and advised her-

“Drink in silence; eat with caution and keep due decorum while you are there. Tarry no longer than is necessary. Come back home quietly.”

When Meen Mechik arrived at her destination, she attracted the attention of Rengra Balsa. The perfect symmetry of her whole body appealed to his artistic eyes. He desired to have the beautiful damsel. He asked one of his friends to offer and make her drink more and more wine of best quality.

Meen Mechik, forgetting her husband’s caution ate and drank more than enough. By nightfall she was dead drunk. When she was deep in sleep, Rengra Balsa challenged Amak Meha Khale Phante to tattoo her by means of a bluish mixture known as _Chirama Khalema Aldama Thangsikma_. The man accepted the challenge and tattooed her without her knowledge. When she woke up, she saw the unsightly blemish on her body and fumed in utter rage and disgust:

“This playing on pranks on me is indecent and improper. I cannot forgive the rash perpetrator of this mischievous foul joke. I will

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tell my husband what has happened. I will show the scandalous marks to my spouse”.

She ran to her husband and narrated the whole story. When she showed the tattoo marks her husband became furious with anger. Taking his milam (two edged sword) in his hands, he rushed out of his house and hurried to the place where his wife was insulted. With a view to find the real culprit, Gingbo closely interrogated all the male members present. When this failed to produce any result, he challenged each one to prove his innocence by taking a solemn oath and biting the blade of his milam. One by one, the males came forward and swore innocence by biting the milam. But Amak Meh-a, smarting under the sense of his guilt, recoiled from the sacred oath and would not come forward to bite the sword. Accordingly guilt was fixed on him. Perceiving the menacing attitude and infuriated looks of Gingbo, Amak Meh-a took to his heels without much ado. He finally hid himself under the armpit of Siram Racha Bolking Gitil, the first tree, who graciously welcomed the fugitive and openly offered protection. Gingbo asked the big tree to give him up who is concealing under her armpit, so that he could fight him and kill him.

Siram Racha proudly retorted that Gingbo should not threaten a guest who has taken refuge with her. Because she considers herself a common refuge of all beings in times of needs.

With anger in his heart Gingbo listened to the insulting words of the first tree and vowed vengeance on mighty Siram Racha too. Accordingly he took help from his parental relations. With their assistance and support in this hour of humiliation he decided to defeat the formidable enemy. So in a short time, a terrible assault was made on the common enemy and Siram Racha was overthrown, her branches were severed and her trunk split lengthwise.

Meen Mechik, the wife of Gingbo, was permitted to go in a funeral ceremony on condition that she conducts herself carefully. There was a word of caution from the husband, which expects her to fulfill all the norms of femininity by the male world. When she forgot the caution and ate and drank more than enough she crossed the boundary, like Sita who also crossed the line of caution demarcated for her safety by Lakshman. Both of them faced trouble after that,
Sita was kidnapped by Ravana and Meen Mechik was tattooed without her knowledge taking advantage of her intoxicated state.

Her act of drinking more could be interpreted as an act unconscious subversion. She did not listen to her husband and did what she liked, could be termed as a mark of protest and assertion of herself against the domination. As a result she was tattooed which means she was branded by the society as immoral. Her act of protest or asserting herself had made her an immoral woman in the eyes of the male world. In doing completely opposite to her husband’s wish she might have tried to subvert patriarchal gender relations. Going out and freely enjoying life in full public view is not expected from a woman. Woman should be confined within the four walls and be silent. She can not exercise freedom.

The husband who stood in her honour and tried to find out the culprit also is a stereotype of a male whose duty is to protect his wife in her distress.

The big tree under which the culprit took the shelter was punished for her act of being the protector. As she went against the norm and protected an evil doer, she was punished.

Both the women in this tale took a stand and asserted themselves. The tree was punished because she acted against the society’s notion of good and bad. She followed her own judgement which was not allowed by the male world. Independent woman who acts on her own, needs to be punished to preserve male hegemony. Male superiority can not be challenged. Her act of not handing out the person who took shelter under her arms is an act of subversion. Even when done from a relatively disempowered position this resistance is an exercise of power in the social construction of meaning. She defied male authority. Edward R. Lee observes in *Psyche as Hero* that patriarchy creates role models for people which are inhibiting and stereotypical but when a woman finds herself capable of breaking chains of patriarchal cultures around her and acts in this direction she becomes a woman hero. Both the women are here seen as transgressors. They disobeyed the role set for them. The tree went against society in protecting the culprit and the wife went against her husband’s wish and prohibition in enjoying life in full public glare.