

Haunters or Haunted?: A Feminist Anatomization of Female Ghosts (Shakchunni, Sheekol Buri, and Prapti) from Bengali Folk Tales through the Prism of Biological Essentialism

Ahmed Abdullah Bin Farooqi Rayhan

Undergraduate student

Department of English

Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Bangladesh

E-mail: abdullah.stu20186@juniv.edu

Abstract

This research examines the cultural insights provided by the female ghosts of Bengali folktales. It applies a feminist hermeneutics to analyze the demonization of women in the aforementioned narratives, specifically focusing on three popular female ghosts: Shakchunni, Sheekol Buri, and Prapti. The representation of these female ghosts reinforces traditionally "feminine" and derogatory traits and attributes. It is noteworthy that these female ghosts exclusively target men as their victims, whereas male ghosts do not exhibit such gender preference. The research also highlights that these female ghosts transform into malevolent supernatural entities due to their experiences of abusive or frustrating love lives. This observation reflects the Bengali tendency to disproportionately associate women with the ideas of marriage and romantic relationships, despite male involvement being evident. Additionally, female ghosts are typically depicted as grotesque, emphasizing society's conventional notion of physical appearance as an integral aspect of a woman's identity. By adopting a feminist lens and incorporating concepts such as Judith Butler's theory of biological essentialism and gender performativity, this study aims to shed light on the gender-biased attitudes prevalent in Bengali folktales and reveal how folk narrative carries the gender-discriminatory undertone pervasive in Bengali society.

Keywords: Bengali Folklore, Biological Essentialism, Female Ghost, Feminism, Gender Performativity

Introduction

Mary Roach (2005), in her *Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife* speculates, "Ghosts are a part of our culture, whether we believe in them or not" (p. 17). According to her observation ghosts are an essential and fascinating part of our cultural fabric (Roach, 2005, p. 17). They connect individuals to the mysteries of the past and hold reminders of our own morality. Despite being imaginary, they serve as a powerful symbol of the human experience, embodying our collective fears, desires, and cultural perspectives.

Bengali folklore contains a rich tapestry of mythical beings and supernatural entities, including ghosts that have long captivated the cultural imagination of the region. The traditional stories about ghosts have evolved over centuries, reflecting beliefs, values, and social norms prevalent in Bengali society. Among these spectral figures, female ghosts have emerged as a prominent presence with their own distinct characteristics and narratives. Female ghosts, in particular, are often portrayed as being notoriously vengeful. This representation of female ghosts can be seen as a reflection of the patriarchal values of Bengali society.

According to Alan Dundes (1976) "folklore as a mirror of culture frequently reveals the area of special concern" (p. 471). It reflects the values, beliefs, and practices of the people who create it (Dundes, 1976, p. 471). As folklore serves as a reflection of the socio-cultural dynamics and gender dynamics of a particular region, the nature of representations and narratives provide a clear view of the prevailing attitudes, biases, and stereotypes associated with gender along with other issues. The portrayal of female ghosts in these cultural narratives becomes a crucial area of inquiry as it sheds light on the ways in which gender roles, power structures, and societal expectations shape both the natural and the supernatural realm.

Bengali society is a patriarchal society. Men are typically seen as the dominant gender while women are often deemed as being inferior. This patriarchal ideology is reflected in the representation of female ghosts in Bengali folklore. Such representation of female ghosts can be seen as a way of reinforcing the patriarchal values of Bengali society.

It is apparent that the representation of female ghosts in Bengali folklore is derogatory. But the question is, to what extent does the representation of female ghosts in Bengali folklore reflect derogatory portrayals, reinforce gender stereotypes, and contribute to unequal power dynamics within the culture. This research will involve a comprehensive analysis of this matter by critically examining a range of Bengali folk tales, legends, and ghost stories.

Through utilization of both primary and secondary sources such as published folk tales, scholarly articles, and relevant cultural studies, this research will examine the narratives surrounding female ghosts, identify recurring themes, tropes, and patterns that may contribute novel insights to the existing understanding of the portrayal of the supernatural entities in question.

Ultimately, through the prism of Judith Butler's theory of biological essentialism and gender performativity, this research intends to unearth findings that will eventually contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender representation in folklore, stereotypes in literature, and challenge the prevalent stereotypes surrounding gender.

Literature Review

Female apparitions depicted in Bengali folk narratives serve as a means of delving into the intricacies inherent to gender and sexuality. In general, female ghosts frequently embody dual roles as both hapless recipients of harm and relentless pursuers of retribution, thereby presenting a departure from conventional gender norms (Davis, 2007, p. 72). From this perspective, these folk tales offer valuable insights into the processes of gender and sexuality construction and the subsequent societal struggles surrounding these concepts.

The examination of these notions primarily revolves around Judith Butler's theory of biological essentialism and gender performativity. Biological essentialism depicts a process in which biological influences precede cultural influences and set predetermined limits to the effects of culture (De Cecco and Elia, 1993). Within the realm of folktales, a pattern emerges wherein females are frequently subjected to judgment based on their biological attributes. Specifically, female apparitions are portrayed as physically unappealing, thereby reinforcing the conventional perception of women's inferiority. This perception is closely linked to the traditional notion of women being biologically weaker than men, consequently relegating them to submissive positions within society. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the absence of traditionally "feminine" biological traits, such as physical beauty, is ascribed to malevolent supernatural entities.

Gender performativity, an interconnected concept, further contributes to this discourse. Butler (1990), in her seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* asserts that gender is not an inherent or biologically determined characteristic but rather a social construct. In her words, "Gender is performative [...] that is, it is 'real' only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler, 1990, p. 152). She posits that gender finds its reality solely in the acts through which it is performed. These acts encompass a range of behaviors

such as manner of dress, speech patterns, and bodily movements. Significantly, these performative acts not only reflect an individual's preexisting gender identity but actively participate in its construction and consolidation.

The performative aspects commonly associated with women in the Indian subcontinent find parallels in the characteristic traits exhibited by female ghosts within Bengali folklore. These spectral entities prominently display an obsession with their past romantic and marital relationships, a theme distinctly linked to femininity within the cultural context of the East. Furthermore, the portrayal of women in these narratives reflects their profound susceptibility to the dynamics of their relationships with male counterparts. Women are depicted as coy, submissive figures, vulnerable to mistreatment. However, when they deviate from this expected behavior and assume the roles of wrathful and vengeful beings, they cease to be classified as women and instead assume designations such as *petni*, *chudail*, or *daini*, thereby assuming the identity of female ghosts. In essence, these folktales convey the notion that the vengeful and horrifying apparitions represent women who have transcended their socially assigned gender roles.

Both biological essentialism and gender performativity are pertinent theories in this context, as they can elucidate the underlying factors contributing to the manifestation of female ghosts and facilitate a comprehensive analysis of their nature of representation.

Although the perspective presented is relatively recent, the subject of this discourse has been previously explored. Extensive research has been conducted on the portrayal of female characters in well-known folktales such as *ThakumarJhuli* and *Folktales from Bengal*. These scholarly discussions delve into the characteristics and roles of women depicted in various narratives, shedding light on the cultural implications embedded within such representations.

Almond, in his work "The Ghost Story in Mexican, Turkish, and Bengali Fiction: Bhut, Fantasma, Hayalet," highlights the prevalent tendency to depict female ghosts with malevolent intentions. He states,

"Amongst the many characteristics Aura shares with other ghost stories here – female malevolence." (Almond, 2017, p. 221).

In other words, the portrayal of malevolence is a shared characteristic among female ghosts in Bengali ghost stories. Almond further highlights the connection between Bengali female ghosts and the theme of property possession, citing examples from Tagore's stories.

Kajori Patra similarly observes the presence of female malevolence in the characters of *ThakumarJhuli*. She notes that,

“...notably, the prime antagonists are often women, and not barely incidental, but powerful she-demons and evil queens.” (Patra, 2021, p. 17).

In this analysis, the author's primary focus lies in the portrayal of females as strong and powerful, which contrasts with traditional notions. However, it is noteworthy that, consistent with the previous argument, the female ghosts in *ThakumarJhuli* are also depicted as derogatory characters who cause harm to others.

Madhumita Bose (2018) provides noteworthy insights regarding the representation of women in the widely recognized collection of Bengali folktales titled *Folk Tales of Bengal* by Lal Behari Day. According to Madhumita's research findings, the female characters portrayed in these stories are portrayed as weak and inferior to their male counterparts. Their worth is determined by their chastity and evaluated based on standards established by men (Bose, 2018).

Interestingly, the women in these stories are equipped with extreme qualities. “The dual image of women presents the qualities in their extremes. Either the woman is extraordinarily good, touching divinity, or she is unimaginably evil, baser than the basest.” (Chaudhuri, 2014).

Although the statement does not explicitly express a direct judgment, it suggests that certain female characters, including all the female ghosts, are portrayed as “unimaginably evil” and “baser than the basest” (Chaudhuri, 2014) in contrast to divine beings. The rationale behind interpreting these implications as directed towards female ‘ghosts’ is rooted in the observation that Behary Day's book does not depict any virtuous traits among the female ghost characters.

Millet has pointed out that the relationship between men and women in these tales is that of “dominance and subordination” (Millet, 2000, p. 25). It is also made apparent by Millet that in these stories patriarchy of male is oppressive on female.

Sovan Chakraborty (2017) primarily directs his attention towards the derogatory depiction of women found within these tales where women are portrayed as necessary evil. This portrayal serves to shape readers' belief systems in a way that marginalizes and disempowers women. The folktales, according to Chakraborty, reflect the persistent presence of misogynistic trends in society. Chakraborty also highlights the objectification of women

under the male gaze, where possessing a beautiful appearance becomes the primary criterion for marriage and social acceptance. According to these stories, traditionally, 'good' women are those who exhibit insecurity and vulnerability within society (Chakraborty, 2017).

To sum it all up, the existing scholarly discourse predominantly centers on the depiction of women in a derogatory manner and the pervasive influence of patriarchy and misogyny. Nevertheless, the current body of literature lacks a comprehensive examination of the supernatural female characters in Bengali folklore, particularly regarding their transcendence of prescribed gender roles. These female ghosts challenge and defy numerous societal expectations and norms imposed upon women. Consequently, they are often portrayed with fear and animosity. However, upon closer scrutiny, it becomes apparent that these supernatural entities possess their own moral and rational justifications for their actions. Despite the absence of extensive scholarly investigations into the representation of female ghosts in Bengali folktales, this study aims to address this research gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the presentation of Shakchunni, Sheekol Buri, and Prapti. By scrutinizing the nature of their portrayal, this research seeks to shed light on the underlying factors contributing to the prevailing depiction of these female ghosts.

Biological Essentialism and Gender Performativity: Theoretical Framework

Gender is a social construct rather than a biological essential. A gender identity is solidified through repeated acts and expressions. It is not fixed or natural, but is rather something that is performed through various social practices. Judith Butler (1990) deduces such interpretation in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Her ideas have effectively explained the gender dynamic that exists in society, particularly in a patriarchal context (Butler, 1990, p. 175).

The overall portrayal of female ghosts in Bengali folktale is complex and multifaceted. These tales can be seen as a reflection of the patriarchal society in which they were created. By understanding the nature of female ghosts through the lens of Butler's theory of gender performativity and biological essentialism, a deeper comprehension of the gender dynamic can be reached which is the prominent aim of this study.

In Bengali folklore, female apparitions such as Shakchunni, Sheekol Buri, and Prapti are endowed with attributes that deviate from conventional femininity. Scholars have observed that conventional feminine traits entail qualities of nurturing, sensitivity, amiability, supportiveness, affection, tenderness,

gentleness, modesty, humility, empathy, passivity, cooperativeness, expressiveness, warmth, and emotional receptivity, exemplifying women's customary social roles. Accordingly, in line with Butler's theoretical framework, these behaviors represent the gender performance of femininity. Conversely, it becomes evident that female spirits in Bengali folklore conspicuously lack such traditional characteristics. In essence, women who do not conform to the societal norms that define femininity are deemed societal outcasts and are subject to derogatory treatment and perceptions.

In order to get a better understanding of the entire idea, it is important to become familiar with some concepts and terms that are significant for this study.

It is apparent by now that the basis of this study is the theory of biological essentialism and gender performativity. Biological essentialism is the belief that there are certain innate, biological differences between men and women that account for their different social roles and behaviors. Butler argues that biological essentialism is a harmful and inaccurate way of understanding gender. She argues that gender is not something that is innate, but rather something that is socially constructed. In other words, gender is not something that we are born with, but rather something that we learn through our interactions with the world around us.

Gender performativity is a closely related set of ideas. It states that gender is not a fixed or stable identity, but rather something that is constantly being (re)produced through our actions and interactions. She uses the term "performativity" to refer to the ways in which we "do" gender, or the ways in which we enact the norms and expectations associated with our gender. Butler argues that gender performativity is not simply a matter of choice. Rather, it is something that we are compelled to do in order to be recognized as a particular gender. For example, we are expected to dress, speak, and act in certain ways in order to be recognized as women or men.

The most recurring context that is profoundly present in this study is the notion of a patriarchal society. This term refers to a social system in which men hold primary power and authority, and women are often marginalized or subordinated. In such social context, the ideologies of men are prominent and dominant.

Methodology

The research design employed in this study is prominently qualitative in nature, aiming to delve into the feminist hermeneutics surrounding the demonization of women in Bengali folklore. By utilizing qualitative methods, this research seeks to explore the cultural insights and meanings associated with the representation of female ghosts in Bengali folklore in a comprehensive and in-depth manner. Nonetheless, this research includes a portion that involves quantitative method as well.

To gather data, archival research and content analysis will be employed. Archival research entails an extensive examination of existing texts, books, articles, and folklore collections that document Bengali folktales. This approach serves as the foundation for understanding the representation and contextualization of the female ghosts under investigation.

In addition to archival research, content analysis of popular media adaptations of the folktales will be employed as a data collection method. Incorporating these modern media adaptations strengthens the credibility and validity of the findings, providing a clearer understanding of the gender biases embedded within these representations.

The selection of media adaptations for this study will be purposeful, based on the view count on YouTube. Higher view counts indicate popularity, and in this context, popularity serves as a standard to gauge the adaptation that engages the broadest audience.

Once the data has been collected through archival research and the popular media adaptation, it will be subjected to rigorous analysis. Thematic analysis will be employed to identify patterns, themes, and recurring ideas pertaining to the representation of female ghosts in Bengali folktales. This analysis will focus on cultural insights, gender biases, and the portrayal of women in folklore.

Furthermore, an interpretative analysis will be conducted incorporating the understanding of biological essentialism and the theory of gender performativity. This interpretative analysis aims to unveil the underlying gender-biased attitudes within the folklore representations and shed light on the cultural implications of these portrayals.

To enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, triangulation will be employed. Multiple data sources, such as popular media adaptations and archival research, will be compared and cross-referenced to validate the findings. This triangulation approach strengthens the robustness and reliability of the research, drawing upon diverse sources of information.

Throughout the research process, reflexivity will be maintained. The research acknowledges personal biases and potential influences that may impact the interpretation of the findings. This reflexivity allows for an objective analysis and minimizes any potential bias that may arise during the research process.

Through the utilization of the aforementioned strategies, this study intends to provide valuable insights into the cultural implications of the representation of female ghosts in Bengali folklore, while shedding light on the gender-biased attitudes embedded within these representations.

Observing The Presentation of Female Ghost in Folk Narratives: Examining The Representational Poetics

The presence of female ghosts in Bengali folk narratives is relatively limited in quantity. However, amidst this scarcity, only three hold significant prominence in terms of their dominant roles in action-oriented contexts. Specifically, the female specters under investigation in this study are Shakchunni, Sheekol Buri, and Prapti, as they exert substantial influence over the trajectory of the stories or tales in which they feature. Moreover, these three entities hold the utmost recognition as female ghosts within the Indian subcontinent. It is noteworthy that all other female apparitions can be regarded as variations or derivations of Shakchunni, Sheekol Buri, and Prapti. For instance, in diverse regions of India and Pakistan, Shakhchunni is known as 'Churel' and 'Petni' (Chawla, 1994). Thus, a comprehensive examination of Shakchunni, Sheekol Buri, and Prapti will provide valuable insights into the broader portrayal of female ghosts in Bengali folktales.

Numerous folktales, contemporary narratives, and media adaptations depict female apparitions with recurring characteristics evident across various renditions. These shared attributes include notably similar backstories, which shall now be expounded upon in the ensuing discussion of these female specters' accounts.

Shakhchunni, a prominent figure in Bengali folklore, is consistently portrayed in a manner that evokes a collective recognition and infamy. Her physical depiction and actions position her as a subject of disdain, repulsion, and abhorrence. Mahesh Chandra Dutta's (1893) scholarly work, *Folklore in Bengal* provides an account of Shakhchunni, wherein she is described as follows:

"Shakhchunni was a hideous old woman with a face like a toad, a protruding chin, and matted hair. She was so ugly that people were afraid to look at her.

She was also very evil, and she would often cast spells on people and make them sick" (Dutta, 1893, p. 36).

In a similar vein, Rajshekhar Basu (1924), in his anthology of short stories titled *Gaddalika*, presents a portrayal of Shakhchunni that further underscores the entity's notorious physical attributes. Basu (1924) writes:

"With a towel wrapped around her body and over the ruffled hair on her head, Shankchunni took big steps with her heron-like feet (thin and long)" (Basu, 1924, p. 132).

Shankchunni's characterization also finds substantial presence in popular media adaptations, where she is portrayed with deliberate intent to evoke terror through distinctive attributes. In such representations, Shakchunni possesses distinct physical features, including pointed ears, sharp teeth, and a pair of vivid red eyes. Notably, her entire body is depicted as being enveloped in a shade of green. Collectively, this portrayal establishes Shakchunni as an abhorrent figure, exaggerating her grotesque physical appearance.

Furthermore, alongside the deliberate intention to depict Shakchunni as visually unappealing, her customary characterization encompasses the presence of a specific item of jewelry known as the "Shankha." This jewelry, from which Shakchunni derives her name, comprises a unique type of traditional bangle crafted from shell material. In the context of Bengal, the Shankha holds cultural significance as a symbol worn by married Hindu women.

The etymology of the name "Shakchunni" is elucidated by the narrative of her origins. According to Mahesh Chandra Dutta's (1893) seminal work, *Folklores in Bengal*, Shakchunni's backstory unveils her past as a young woman who entered matrimony with a prosperous individual. Regrettably, her marital union proved to be marked by cruelty and abuse inflicted upon her by her husband, ultimately culminating in her untimely demise. Returning as a ghostly apparition, Shakchunni assumed the role of a relentless specter, haunting her erstwhile spouse. Given her distressing experiences within her own marital life, she harbored an intense longing for a harmonious companionship. Consequently, she targeted contentedly married women, subjugating and usurping their identities to perpetuate an illusion of matrimonial bliss on behalf of her victims (Dutta, 1893). In essence, her actions can be construed as a fervent pursuit of unfulfilled desires, driven by her unresolved yearnings.

Subsequently, another notable entity within Bengali folklore is Sheekol Buri, also recognized as Jol-Pishach. Reginald Edward Enthoven (2000), in his

comprehensive work titled *Encyclopedia of Indian Folk Literature* documents the narratives surrounding the myth of Sheekol Buri. As per the findings presented in this scholarly compendium, Sheekol Buri is categorized as a supernatural entity prevalent in Bengali folklore. These beings are perceived as spirits of young women who, either by their own volition following a distressing marital relationship (such as being deserted by their lovers or subjected to mistreatment and abuse by significantly older spouses), or against their will through violent submersion (particularly subsequent to conceiving unwanted offspring), are compelled to endure their designated earthly tenure before reincarnating as such beings. Locating their abodes within rivers, ponds, and lakes, Sheekol Buri is predominantly associated with the ominous task of ensnaring young men, ultimately leading them to a fatal demise.

Sheekol Buri, as described in Bengali folklore, is characterized by certain distinctive physical attributes. She is typically depicted as possessing long hair and pale complexion. Notably, her eyes are described as disproportionately large, devoid of any discernible iris. Sheekol Buri is frequently depicted as perched upon trees or rocks near bodies of water, and she is believed to possess the ability to assume the appearance of other individuals.

Upon encountering a Sheekol Buri, a young man is often subjected to her attempts to entice him into the water. Employing various tactics such as singing or storytelling, Sheekol Buri endeavors to deceive the young man. If the young man succumbs to her allure, she ensnares his feet with her hair and submerges him, leading to his untimely demise.

In addition, Sheekol Buri legends suggest the possibility of establishing romantic relationships with human individuals. However, these ill-fated unions are inevitably destined for tragedy. Ultimately, Sheekol Buri unveils her true nature to her lover, resulting in his demise or descent into madness. Furthermore, it is believed that Sheekol Buri possesses the ability to grant wishes. Nevertheless, such wishes are often accompanied by grave consequences and burdensome prices (Enthoven, 2000).

It is worth noting that, akin to Shakhchunni, Sheekol Buri is described as bearing a physical deformity. The deliberate portrayal of their pale skin and iris-less dark eyes serves to depict a countenance devoid of features traditionally deemed attractive within Bengali culture.

Moreover, like Shakhchunni, the female ghosts exhibit vengeful tendencies, seeking retribution against young men due to the circumstances surrounding their own deaths, which were influenced by the dynamics of their relationships.

Ultimately, the violent disposition attributed to Sheekol Buri is rooted in the injustice inflicted upon them. Having suffered unjustifiable murders, these apparitions now haunt men as a means to exact revenge.

Prapti, a relatively lesser-known female ghost, is documented in Reginald Edward Enthoven's (2000) comprehensive work titled *Encyclopedia of Indian Folk Literature*.

The term "Prapti" derives its origins from the Sanskrit language and denotes the act of acquiring or obtaining something. Within the context of spectral manifestations, it specifically refers to female individuals who found themselves entangled in complex romantic relationships involving multiple partners, thereby experiencing the anguish of indecisiveness. The narrative surrounding Prapti suggests that these individuals, overwhelmed by the conflicts and emotional turmoil, resorted to self-inflicted death as a means to attain liberation from their entangled predicaments.

Upon the demise of the female figure, her lovers faced a choice: either to join her in death through suicide or endure torment and succumb to madness as they confronted the haunting presence of Prapti. Paradoxically, despite the demise of these lovers, they are unable to possess or attain the female counterpart who eludes them, perpetuating her vengeance. Consequently, the spectral entities of the deceased lovers remain perpetually ensnared in an eternal quest to attain the unattainable love of Prapti (Enthoven, 2000).

The present analysis reveals a discernible convergence among Shakchunni, Sheekol Buri, and Prapti, with regards to shared attributes. Specifically, these female apparitions are depicted as possessing heightened, perilous and malevolent characteristics, typically exerting harm upon the living, particularly males. Moreover, within Bengali folktales, female ghosts assume the symbolic role of embodying lingering grief that remains unresolved. Their portrayal encapsulates the essence of departed women who have succumbed to tragic circumstances, subsequently returning from the realm of the deceased to exact retribution for the injustices committed against them. Notably, these female specters are depicted as abhorrent, wicked, and malicious entities whenever their portrayal showcases strength and authority comparable to, if not surpassing, that of their male counterparts. Such an interpretation lends itself to the proposition that, within the confines of Bengali patriarchal society, deviating from prescribed gender roles and engaging in activities typically reserved for men leads to societal ostracism and the imposition of unconventional treatment. Additionally, it is worth highlighting that the female ghosts are intrinsically entwined with romantic relationships, with

these relationships serving as the principal narrative thread guiding the ultimate fate of these women.

Analyzing The Presentation of Female Ghost In Bengali Folktales: Revealing The Representational Politics

Judith Butler (1990), in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* says, "Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed." (Butler, 1990, p. 33)

In the passage, Judith Butler expounds on the concept that gender should not be perceived as an immutable entity or a mere catalog of attributes. Instead, she posits that gender is intricately entwined with societal norms and regulations, which actively shape and mold the very identity it purports to embody. Butler contends that gender is an ongoing, performative phenomenon, consistently influenced by external factors, rather than being solely dependent on an individual's preexisting agency.

Butler posits that our comprehension of gender is profoundly rooted in societal structures that exert influence even prior to our birth. It constitutes an underlying framework that impacts the development of our identities through the lens of culture and society. Contrary to a view grounded in biological determinism, Butler contends that gender is not an immutable construct but rather a product of ongoing social and cultural practices. These practices encompass various aspects of our lives, such as attire, behavior, and self-expression, and contribute to the shaping of our perception regarding the characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity.

Scholars such as Windsor (2015), Burke and Stets (2009), Vetterling-Braggin (1982), and Kite (2001) have identified a range of traits, including nurturance, sensitivity, sweetness, supportiveness, affection, tenderness, gentleness, modesty, radiance, beauty, humility, empathy, passivity, cooperativeness, submissive, warmth, kindness, helpfulness, devotion, and understanding, as being associated with stereotypical femininity. From this perspective, it can be argued, in line with Butler's assertion, that women are expected to possess these aforementioned traits, as they form the core components of the traditional feminine gender role.

If this claim remains valid, it becomes apparent that the current investigation operates within the realm of representational politics. Representational politics can be characterized as the examination of how different groups and identities are depicted within political institutions, discourses, and actions (Ghosh, 2016, p. 3). This area of study delves into the consequences of representation on the incorporation, exclusion, acknowledgment, and redistribution of diverse social groups and their interests. Furthermore, it explores the ways in which various forms of representation, including descriptive, substantive, symbolic, and performative, influence the social dynamics within specific communities.

The female ghosts depicted in Bengali folktales can be seen as victims of the influence of representational politics. Within these narratives, these characters embody qualities that deviate from the traditionally ascribed 'feminine' traits. Consequently, it can be argued that due to the workings of representational politics, the strong, courageous, and formidable female ghosts become social outcasts, eliciting emotions of hatred, disgust, and fear in their portrayal and reception.

To conduct a thorough analysis of the absence of traditional feminine traits in female ghosts, this study employs a categorical framework by dividing the aforementioned attributes into three distinct groups. By comparing these attributes with the characteristics exhibited by female ghosts, a comprehensive assessment can be made. The examination unveils that the female ghosts are associated with traits that directly oppose the traditionally accepted feminine qualities, indicating a stark contrast between the two.

The initial category of character traits encompasses positive social attributes, as outlined by Windsor (2015), Burke (2009), Vetterling-Bruggin (1982), and Kite (2001), which traditionally associate women with qualities such as nurturing, affection, kindness, and empathy. However, in direct contrast to these personality traits, the actions undertaken by female ghosts are characterized by cruelty, atrocity, and are perceived as horrific. While the narratives may provide a backstory that justifies their vengeful and malevolent nature, their portrayal within the tales positions them in the role of the antagonistic villain.

Shakchunni, for instance, exhibits a behavior where she possesses women and targets married men for her killings. In her actions, there is no indication of kindness or empathy towards innocent women. Similarly, Sheekol Buri entices unsuspecting men and ultimately strangles them to death. Prapti also engages in similar behavior. Collectively, these female ghosts lack the positive social attributes that are conventionally associated with women. They do not

display the nurturing, affectionate, kind, and empathetic qualities that are expected to be inherent in women.

In addition to the aforementioned positive traits, women are often expected to possess qualities of sensitivity, sweetness, humility, and gentleness. However, Bengali female ghosts are depicted in a manner that contrasts sharply with these expectations. Shakchunni, for instance, is known for her ability to haunt and possess individuals in their dreams. She specifically targets her relatives or those connected to her, inflicting nightmares and causing distress (Bandyopadhyay, 2016). In essence, Shakchunni inflicts psychological pain upon her innocent victims, exhibiting a brutal and horrific nature that contradicts the qualities of sensitivity and sweetness traditionally associated with women.

Sheekol Buri also displays brutality in her actions. As per popular folktales, her primary objective is to entice young men and lead them into the depths of waterways. Once there, she ensnares their feet with her long hair and submerges them, suffocating them to death (Das, 2020). Similarly, Prapti inflicts torment upon her victims by driving them to madness due to their internal struggles with indecision. These victims are portrayed as innocent individuals, further reinforcing the ruthless nature of these entities. The depiction of such vicious and violent actions by these female ghosts portrays a stark contrast to the expected traits of sensitivity, sweetness, and gentleness associated with women.

The physical appearance of these female ghosts aligns with traits that are conventionally considered repulsive. Folktales and media adaptations consistently attribute characteristics such as discolored skin, disfigured limbs, and a raucous voice to these female ghosts. While these traits are prominently emphasized in their portrayal, it is noteworthy that the female ghosts are also depicted as possessing long hair, which is often considered a defining characteristic of Bengali women (Benedict, 2015). The preservation and emphasis placed on their long hair serves as a reminder of their gender, while the other abhorrent traits further emphasize the grotesque aspects associated with these women.

Additionally, it is worth highlighting that the folktales do not place as much emphasis on the horrifying physical appearance of male ghosts compared to their female counterparts. The notion of physical radiance is predominantly associated with femininity (Singh, 2011), and the deliberate absence of such traits in female ghosts serves to underscore their departure from traditional notions of femininity. This aspect of representational politics within the tales reflects the societal expectations prevalent in traditional Bengali culture.

In Bengali culture, women are often expected to adhere to specific behavioral orientations, including passivity, submissiveness, and devotion to the male head of the family. However, the female ghosts portrayed in the folktales defy these expectations and exhibit behavior that is entirely opposite in nature. Instead of passivity, submissiveness, and devotion, these female ghosts demonstrate assertiveness, independence, and a propensity for vengeance. Their actions and behaviors stand in stark contrast to the traditional gender roles and behavioral expectations imposed upon women in Bengali culture.

Upon further examination of the folktales, it becomes apparent that the female ghosts are indeed not passive in nature. They actively seek revenge for the wrongs inflicted upon them. Shakchunni haunts her prey, Sheekol Buri pulls down her victims, and Prapti drives innocent boys to insanity in response to the suffering they endured in their lives. This portrayal presents them as anything but submissive. In fact, they embody the opposite of submission. The female ghosts met their tragic fate because they resisted being dutifully devoted to their male counterparts. Shakchunni and Sheekol Buri experienced torment in their married lives, and their refusal to conform to societal expectations of devotion led to their misfortune. Similarly, had Prapti been devoted to one partner, her life would not have ended in such a disastrous manner. The presentation of these female ghosts implies that a lack of devotion and a refusal to be submissive can lead women to tragic ends. The protest from their end serves to depict them as non-devoted and non-submissive. It is this underlying theme that contributes to the negative response and reverence associated with these female ghosts or entities possessing the examined traits.

In summary, the female ghosts in the folktales do not conform to traditional feminine traits of being coy or devoted to their husbands or male counterparts. Instead, they exhibit characteristics of vengeance and strength. These non-conforming traits, which deviate from societal expectations of femininity, have led to the patriarchal society casting them as malevolent entities without considering the context of their past sufferings. The reason behind their negative recognition stems from their failure to fulfill the prescribed gender roles assigned to them.

Indeed, the intentional presentation of female ghosts in Bengali folktales with traits that deviate from traditional femininity suggests a deliberate messaging. It can be argued that these depictions aim to convey the idea that adopting alternative gender roles and exhibiting traits typically associated with masculinity would result in social exclusion. The patriarchal society, feeling threatened by women who challenge societal norms by protesting, rebelling, and displaying strength and courage, marks women with these traits, such as

the female ghosts, as potential threats to the established order. It is important to acknowledge that this perception and response would likely have been different in a cultural context that was not predominantly male-dominated.

Conclusion

As stated in the introductory section of this research, despite the absence of actual existence, ghosts possess a pervasive influence on our psyche and subtly shape our thoughts. The purpose of this research paper was to explore a segment of this influence and elucidate the underlying reasons behind the portrayal of female ghosts in Bengali folktales. This study employed the frameworks of biological essentialism and gender performativity to analyze the depiction of female ghosts in Bengali folklore. The primary findings of this investigation reveal that female ghosts are often depicted as vengeful, repulsive, and fixated on their past romantic and marital relationships. These portrayals reflect the prevailing patriarchal values and gender stereotypes within Bengali society. Thus, this research makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing discourse on gender representation in folklore, the perpetuation of stereotypes in literature, and the challenges posed by prevailing gender-related stereotypes.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. It does not consider the representation of lesser-known female ghosts from local narratives. Nevertheless, it can be argued that since the three female ghosts examined in this study hold significant recognition, they serve as representatives of popular cultural values.

Future research endeavors may focus on analyzing the role of female ghosts in contemporary Bengali literature, media, and popular culture, and comparing and contrasting their representation with other regional or global folkloric traditions. Additionally, investigating the reception and interpretation of female ghost narratives by diverse audiences, including children, adults, men, and women, offers an avenue for further exploration. Moreover, it would be worthwhile to explore the potential of female ghost stories as a source of empowerment and resistance for women.

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