

TRANSFORMATION AND TESTIMONY: A FEMINIST-ECOCRITICAL READING OF THE LOTHFA FOLKTALE “HOW A SAD MOTHER BECAME A SEROW”

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Lotha Naga folktale “How a Sad Mother Became a Serow” as a complex narrative of ecofeminist resistance, in which a woman’s metamorphosis into a mythical serow embodies both the extremity of maternal suffering under patriarchal neglect and the emergence of a resilient, alternative agency. Employing a multi-faceted theoretical framework that integrates feminist, ecocritical and Structuralist analysis, this paper investigates how the tale re-conceptualizes the interrelations among gender, environment and moral consciousness. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir’s theory of woman as the “Other,” Angela Carter’s writings on the female body as a site of pain and transcendence, and Maria Tatar’s work on suffering as formative to identity, this analysis frames the folktale as a profound allegory for the transformation of silence into agency and personal trauma into collective ethical insight. The argument is further illuminated by Audre Lorde’s imperative to break socially enforced silences as a crucial act of self-definition and liberation. Ultimately, the tale’s oral stylistics and communal narrative structure are shown to reinforce its cultural role as a vessel of shared memory, where feminine grief and the sentient natural world intersect to chronicle a legacy of endurance against intersecting patriarchal and ecological adversities.

KEYWORDS: Lotha Folktale, Feminist Ecocriticism, Maternal Suffering, Transformation and Resilience, Patriarchy and Ecology, Oral Narrative Tradition, Structuralist Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Within the cultural tapestry of the Lotha Naga community of Nagaland, folktales function not as mere diversions but as vital conduits of cultural wisdom and ecological philosophy. “How a Sad Mother Became a Serow,” as recorded by Francis Kikonin *Moon Light Tales and Fables of the Kyong Nagas* (2013), narrates the ordeal of a woman trapped in a cycle of domestic oppression, whose transformation into a serow (a forest-dwelling antelope both real and mythical) embodies themes of alienation, endurance and the unbroken continuity of maternal devotion (Kikon 5-10). Set within a constricting patriarchal domestic space, the story starkly contrasts human cruelty with the natural world’s capacity for empathy: where the family dog recognizes the transformed mother with grieving intuition, the husband remains blind to her suffering.

A multi-faceted reading reveals the tale to be a sophisticated commentary on gendered labor, emotional silence and patriarchal erasure. As Greg Garrard observes, ecocriticism is fundamentally concerned with “the violence and intimacy of the relationship between human culture and the natural world” (60). In this narrative, woman and wilderness are inextricably intertwined, generating a mythic landscape where profound grief is transmuted into ethical fortitude and physical exile becomes a form of spiritual liberation. This paper will argue that through its unique narrative style, its structural logic and its potent symbolism, the folktale articulates a powerful indigenous epistemology where feminine resilience and ecological consciousness are mutually constitutive.

NARRATIVE OVERVIEW OF “HOW A SAD MOTHER BECAME A SEROW”

Once in a village there lived a man, who was no better a loafer, while his wife endured a life of hardship. Her negligent and abusive husband spent his days drinking and idling, showing kindness only to outsiders while subjecting his wife and children to verbal abuse. Burdened by domestic responsibilities and emotional strain, the woman each day took her two young children to the fields to escape her harsh reality. She found consolation with her elder daughter who not only kept her company but also took care of her younger sister. Though she longed to return to her parental home, her devotion to her children kept her rooted. While working, her melancholic songs captivated listeners bring tears to them: “She sings beautifully through her tears”. Over time, her elder daughter matured quickly, and took on the responsibilities of childcare and household duties.

One day, the woman complained of itching on her scalp, which soon became excruciatingly painful. Her daughter discovered small horns emerging from her head. The mother warned her not to speak of it to anyone, particularly her father. Weeks went by and the horns grew long that even her hair couldn’t cover them and she ultimately revealed to her daughter that she was transforming into a serow (a mythical or animalistic creature). One day, in the field she didn’t work but she sang melancholic songs and narrated stories and advised her daughter to care for her sister and remain strong. She hugged her amidst tears and uttered: “Even if I am not with you, be strong because I will always be watching over both of you”, the poignant scene, as tales narrate even the birds, trees and rocks wept. The woman told her daughter never to tell her father or friend what had become of her. Noticing the fast change in her mother the elder daughter lifted her younger sister on her back and headed home. Looking back to the stilt hut she waved and cried out: “Mummy we will always love you no matter what becomes of you. We miss you dearly and be wary of hunters and other wild animals” and her mother nodded her head and gesticulated signs to convey love and affection and vanished into the forest.

In the absence of his wife, the husband realized the burden she went through every day and rued and soaked his pillow with tears, he began to miss her dearly. Hard broken, his attitude changed towards his children and sometimes requested from his eldest daughter what had become of her mother. She always evaded his questions and diverted always to her little sister at his queried. Every day they went to the field. Despite her transformation, she continued to watch her children from afar, foraging near the field, where their dog - recognizing her scent - responded with affection. Eventually, the husband noticed hoof prints and, fearing crop damage, set traps. One day, upon hearing her injured daughter's cries and the elder daughter's repeated pleas for "Mummy," the transformed mother, now a serow, rushed down from the hills and was caught in a trap. Her tearful pleas went unrecognized, and her husband killed her with his Dao, unaware of her true identity. He prepared the meat, offering it to his daughters and the dog. The children refused, identifying the meat as their mother's and buried it in mourning. Even the dog abstained. The elder daughter sang her mother's sorrowful melodies, cherishing her memory and grieving the irreparable loss. (Francis Kikon 5-10) (Abridged version)

NARRATIVE STYLE AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Narrated through a third-person omniscient voice, the folktale employs repetition, melodic refrains and patterned dialogue to root itself in Lotha oral tradition, blending mythic grandeur with human vulnerability. This stylistic framework transforms private sorrow into collective compassion, operating as both social critique and spiritual reflection. The mother's metamorphosis is thus elevated from mere fantasy to an allegorical meditation on endurance.

The tale functions as a cultural repository, encoding memory, morality and environmental consciousness. It critiques patriarchal neglect while affirming maternal perseverance, illustrating the deep interconnection between women and the forest (Keyoor and Subudhi 428-29). The mother's transformation into a serow embodies a symbiosis of human pain and natural empathy, echoing ecofeminist thought that links the domination of women with environmental exploitation (Shiva 45). Through the daughters' lamentations, grief becomes an inherited wisdom - a "ritual of remembering through pain" - Tatar's concept for how grief and the act of mourning are passed down as a form of knowledge and duty from one generation of women to the next in these stories (Tatar, *The Hard Facts*, 142) - reframing feminine suffering as an active, renewing force whose ethical resonance transcends generations and ecosystems.

FEMINIST INTERPRETATION: THE BODY, SUFFERING, AND AGENCY

The mother's transformation from a silent sufferer to a mythic serow transcends fantasy, constituting a sophisticated narrative of feminist resistance. Her journey maps a poignant trajectory from being the defined - the Beauvoirian "Other" whose existence is confined to immanence and domestic servitude - toward becoming the self-defining, leveraging her very physicality as an instrument of agency. This transformation, read through a convergent feminist lens, reveals a sophisticated critique of gendered power structures where suffering is not an end but a catalyst for insurgent reclamation. Initially, her physicality is inscribed with subjugation - a body exhausted by labour, wounded by verbal abuse and emotionally tethered by a devotion, to her children, that prevents escape. Her only allowed expression is her melancholic songs, a vocalization of suffering that, while moving, remains within the realm of passive lament. This embodies Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the "Other," where woman is trapped in immanence - a repetitive, non-transcendent existence defined entirely by her relationship to the patriarchal household (Beauvoir 674). She is an object within her own life, her identity contingent upon her roles as wife and mother under a negligent master.

The turning point, however, arrives not as liberation *from* the body, but as a rebellion *through* it. The physical manifestation of her horns - a painful, bodily eruption - signals the beginning of Angela Carter's "insurgent metamorphosis." In Carter's framework, the punished or bestial female body can become a vehicle for rebellious self-definition, a means of escaping the limitations of the human, social sphere (Carter 39, 41). This is not a passive curse but an active, rebellious self-redefinition through which she escapes the human, patriarchal sphere. She instructs her daughter in secrecy, an act of creating a matriarchal knowledge system separate from the husband and uses her final moments in human form not for weeping, but for strategic counsel - imparting strength and a new ethical framework to her daughters. This is a critical shift from a body *acted upon* to a body *acting*.

Her agency, crucially, is articulated through what Audre Lorde might identify as embodied, silent action. In a patriarchal structure that denies her voice legitimacy, the mother cultivates power outside of speech. She cultivates power not through speech but via what Audre Lorde might term embodied, silent action - her watchful gaze, her gestural language of love, and her final, visceral rush to aid her children become a testament to agency beyond the "master's tools" (Lorde

44). The mother's agency is in her gaze - watching over her children from afar. It is in her deliberate, gestural language of love as she vanishes into the forest, and ultimately, in the final, tragic act of rushing to her children's aid, a visceral, bodily response that transcends her animal form. Her body, even in its new, mythic state, remains the instrument of her care and resistance, a testament to a love that patriarchal oppression could not extinguish.

The tale's devastating conclusion cements this agency's transgenerational impact, fulfilling Maria Tatar's concept of a "ritual of remembering through pain" (Tatar 142). The husband's fatal trapping of the serow is the ultimate act of patriarchal ignorance - literally destroying the transformed mother without recognizing her true identity. Yet, this violent erasure is subverted by the daughters' conscious refusal to participate in the symbolic consumption of their mother. Their rejection of the meat, their act of burial, and the elder daughter's elegiac singing of her mother's songs become a powerful ritual of remembrance - converting personal trauma into an enduring communal ethic that memorializes maternal sacrifice and critiques male violence.

Thus, the narrative arc transmutes the mother's suffering from a state of passive endurance into an active force of feminist consciousness. Her body, once the locus of her confinement, becomes through its painful metamorphosis a vehicle for escape, watchful care, and ultimately, a legacy that empowers her daughters to defy their father and honour a truth he is incapable of seeing. The story powerfully asserts that even when the body is captured and destroyed, the agency born from its suffering can forge an ethics of memory and resistance that endures long after the patriarchal Dao has fallen.

Patriarchal Domestication and the Mother as "the Other".

The mother's existence within the domestic sphere is a stark illustration of Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "the Other," whose subjectivity is systematically negated and subordinated; she is 'powerless against her husband (man)' and becomes 'capable of stoic courage as circumstances demanded of her' (728). Her husband, who maintains a facade of civility for outsiders, exercises sovereignty within the home through verbal and emotional abuse. Defined solely by her utility, the wife is the "Other" whose inner life and suffering are rendered irrelevant to the patriarch. Her life is one of what Beauvoir would classify as "immanence" - a repetitive, cyclical existence confined to the domestic and agrarian spheres - labor in the fields and home is systematically devalued, rendering her the invisible foundation of the family's survival. Her suppressed desire to return to her parental home signifies a longing for a lost subjecthood, a desire she sacrifices, thereby accepting her "otherness" for her children's sake. Therefore, her metamorphosis into a serow signifies not merely a loss of social personhood but a reclamation of an alternative, non-patriarchal moral identity rooted in empathy and spiritual integrity.

The Body as a Site of Insurgent Transformation

The mother's physical transformation is the narrative's central act of feminist rebellion. Angela Carter's work provides a crucial framework for understanding this bodily metamorphosis as an act of insurgent redefinition. For Carter, such transformation constitutes a form of rebellion - a corporeal re-inscription of agency upon a body historically coded as the 'object of punishment' (39) and containment - 'she has done nothing wrong' (41). The growth of horns on the mother's scalp, initially a physical stigma of the "bestly" treatment she has endured, is re-appropriated. Rather than a punishment to be accepted, the horns become a new identity she actively embraces. By confiding in her daughter and orchestrating her own departure, she seizes control of her body's narrative. Thus, her transformation into a serow is an active, corporeal rejection of her human, wifely role - an exchange of servitude for wild autonomy, moving from a space defined by a man to one where she defines herself in relation to the natural world and her children.

Suffering as a Crucible and Moral Inheritance

Maria Tatar's works highlights how folktales often position female suffering as a crucible for forging identity and transmitting moral wisdom. In this story, the mother's pain is a generative force that reshapes the family's moral universe. Tatar's assertion that "female suffering is often the crucible through which identity is forged" (*The Hard Facts* 142) deepens our understanding of the mother's restrained endurance and her plea for secrecy, which reconfigure victimhood into a form of ethical resistance. This shared secret creates a clandestine economy of knowledge and compassion between the women, excluding the patriarch and transforming private suffering into a collective, empowering bond.

Metamorphosis as Testimony: Audre Lorde and the Corporeal Voice

The mother's trajectory from silent endurance to a tragic, yet potent, mode of expression resonates profoundly with Audre Lorde's assertion that "My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you," and that one must learn "to work and speak when we are afraid" (Lorde 44). Her existence is defined by the very silences Lorde condemns; and she channels her suffering through melancholic songs, a lament that remains confined within her domestic role. Her physical metamorphosis into a serow, however, shatters this silence, becoming a radical act of breaking this immobilizing silence. This metamorphosis is a corporeal testimony—a form of "speaking" when words are insufficient or forbidden. This transformation is a profound act of self-definition, re-creating her identity beyond patriarchal constraints (Kikon 8-9); transformation that embodies Lorde's concept of breaking silence as a necessary act of self-definition, as the mother re-creates her identity beyond patriarchal erasure. By vanishing into the forest, she bridges the profound difference between her subjugated human life and a sovereign, non-patriarchal identity. Even her final, fatal act - responding to her injured daughter's cries becomes the most powerful articulation of this newfound voice – the ultimate manifestation of "working and speaking when we are afraid," a desperate, physical declaration that speaks with a clarity words were never granted, fully realizing Lorde's imperative to break the silences that immobilize.

The climax of this transferred agency is the daughters' refusal to consume their mother's flesh. This act is a profound rejection of the patriarchal economy their father represents - one that consumes the labor and very being of women without recognition. By burying the remains and perpetuating their mother's songs, they perform a "ritual of remembering through pain," ensuring her suffering is transformed into an enduring legacy of love and resistance that, as the narrative suggests, transcends death itself (Kikon 9). The folktale thus completes a circle of feminine consciousness, wherein the mother's endured suffering gives birth to transformative agency, which in turn bequeaths a powerful moral and emotional legacy to her daughters.

ECO-CRITICAL AND STRUCTURALIST PERSPECTIVES

The mother's metamorphosis in Francis Kikon's "How a Sad Mother Became a Serow" interrogates the ecological dimensions of patriarchal domination, revealing what Vandana Shiva identifies as the shared epistemological source of women's and nature's subjugation (112). The narrative dramatizes the "violence and intimacy" between culture and nature that Greg Garrard posits as ecocriticism's central concern (60), embodied by the husband's anthropocentric gaze that reduces his wife - first as woman, then as serow - to a pest to be eliminated. Even in her altered, animal form, the mother continues to embody relational ethics and maternal care, thereby affirming the ecofeminist principle of interconnectedness between the human and the non-human (Love 23). His fatal blow with the Dao severs the familial-ecological bond, rejecting the embeddedness within nature that Glen A. Love deems essential for human prosperity (3).

In opposition, the tale constructs what Cheryll Glotfelty terms an “earth-centered” universe (xviii-xix), where the natural world responds with active empathy - the weeping birds, trees, and rocks validating the mother’s transformation (Kikon 7). Her ascent into serow-being reframes the forest as a sanctuary of moral witness, challenging the human-animal binary. The climax hinges on this epistemological conflict: lured by maternal instinct transcending species, the serow-mother’s capture allegorizes the destruction wrought by utilitarian worldviews. Yet through the daughters’ refusal to consume her flesh - a radical rejection of patriarchal economy - and their perpetuation of her songs, they institute an ecological “ritual of remembering,” reading the world through kinship rather than utility. Her presence in the forest transcends biological and social boundaries, positioning nature not as a passive backdrop but as an active moral witness. The serow’s maternal vigilance reconfigures the natural world as a repository of memory and moral consciousness, where loss is transmuted into ethical endurance.

In this sense, the narrative functions as a feminist-ecological allegory that bridges emotional, ethical, and environmental registers. The mother’s transformation reveals how the suffering inflicted by patriarchal neglect becomes a site for ecological reawakening and moral continuity. Structurally, the narrative mediates foundational binaries: Human/Animal, Male/Female - through transformation, resolving what Claude Lévi-Strauss identifies as myth’s cultural contradictions (qtd. in Mambrol). The mother’s metamorphosis transfers ethical authority from failed patriarchy to the enduring bond among mother, daughters, and nature. The father’s structural “ignorance” contrasts with the daughters’ and even the family dog’s transcendent “knowledge” (Kikon 8). Ultimately, the folktale encodes maternal endurance into communal memory through its mythic arc, positing the forest as a restorative moral landscape. It champions an epistemology of sacred reciprocity, suggesting human fulfillment arises not from dominion but from recognizing our place within a sentient, suffering whole.

CONCLUSION

The Enduring Voice of the Serow – Orality, Ethics and Contemporary Relevance

In conclusion, the Lotha Naga folktale “How a Sad Mother Became a Serow” demonstrates the profound synergy of orality and ethics, where its narrative form - the omniscient voice and elegiac refrains - elevates a personal tragedy into an enduring communal testimony. The use of melodic refrains and the daughters’ memorial songs are not merely decorative; they are the very instruments of cultural memory, transforming private grief into a “ritual of remembering through pain” (Tatar, *The Hard Facts* 142). Rasam Ezung remarks that, through such plaintive sorrow-filled songs women pass on their daughters, their hardships, pain, struggles, anxieties and desire for parental home. This is a re-enactment of their painful past, present and a premonition of endanger for their daughters – a subtle warning that may be in-stored for them (Ezung, 16th Sept.). This oral-aural texture ensures that the mother’s suffering is not silenced but is instead sung into permanence, her testimony woven into the fabric of communal identity.

The cultural significance of this tale, therefore, extends far beyond its ethnographic context. It operates as a pre-colonial ecofeminist treatise, articulating the intrinsic link between the subjugation of women and the domination of nature, a connection powerfully argued by eco-feminists like Vandana Shiva (112). In a contemporary world grappling with ecological crisis and pervasive gender-based violence, the folktale’s content offers a radical alternative. It presents a worldview where the forest is not a resource to be exploited but a sanctuary of moral continuity, and where feminine resilience, forged in the crucible of suffering, becomes a blueprint for an ethics of care, reciprocity, and endurance. The story asserts that true prosperity, (*pvülyua eküm* in Lotha) concept central to Lotha cosmology - is unattainable without this foundational respect for the agency of both women and the environment (Lotha, "World-view").

This reaffirms the tale's central arguments, weaving together its Structuralist foundations, feminist-ecocritical insights, and the profound cultural significance of its oral narrative style to underscore its enduring relevance in a contemporary global context - affirming that ethical awareness and ecological consciousness are mutually constitutive, offering a profound meditation on the unity of suffering, endurance, and renewal across both human and natural worlds. "How a Sad Mother Became a Serow" is a masterwork of indigenous storytelling whose significance is both particular and universal. As a vessel of Lotha Naga cultural wisdom, it preserves and transmits a specific ecological and gendered consciousness. Simultaneously, the folktale's potent archetypes - the transformative metamorphosis, the searing critique of patriarchal myopia, and the vision of an ethical order sustained by maternal devotion and ecological sentience - transcend their cultural specificities to achieve a universal resonance. They speak with clarion urgency to the interconnected global crises of gendered violence and environmental degradation.

The narrative thus endures not as a vestige of a receding past, but as a vital, breathing interlocutor in the present. It issues a poignant and persistent challenge: to imagine a world in which no mother is compelled to seek her personhood in the form of a serow. In the daughters' elegiac songs, we find a mandate for memory, ensuring such stories are consecrated not as chronicles of defeat, but as sacred testaments to the unyielding power of love and the enduring force of moral witness. The tale's ultimate power lies in its revelation of a profound alchemy - where silence is transmuted into testimony, anguish is forged into prophecy, and a mother's love becomes an eternal, watchful presence within the forest, perpetually compelling us to see, to recognize, and, above all, to remember.

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