

Tejimola: Her transition from the silent victim to a major environmental voice

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine Tejimola the renowned folktale, famously compiled in Burhi Aair Sadhu by the “rasaraj” (king of essences) of Assam Lakshminath Bez Baroa from an Ecofeminists point of view. The protagonist of the tale, also called Tejimola, is a victim of brutal abuse in the hands of her stepmother. But her story is not of a mere victim—she resists the attempts to erase her existence through ecological metamorphosis. The cruelty faced by Tejimola could be linked to the cruelty faced by the earth herself. She transforms to a gourd plant, a citrus tree, and a lotus plant after her stepmother kills her human form. This shows that she transforms into various natural forms not merely to survive, but to consciously reassert her power within the natural world. Each metamorphosis signifies her continuous refusal of annihilation to the societal tendency to dominate both women and nature. The destruction of Tejimola's body mirrors the violence inflicted upon the earth— the resources consumed, the fertility exploited, the autonomy denied. When her body becomes inseparable from nature It demonstrates symbiosis rather than subjugation. Tejimola's tale is not one of tragic suffering alone but of empowerment through nature in which resilience emerges from every space where patriarchal violence seeks to silence.

KEYWORDS: Ecofeminism, resistance, metamorphosis, annihilation, subjugation, empowerment, patriarchy.

Introduction

“We are leaves of ivy and sprigs of wallflower. We are women. We rise from the waves. We are gazelle and doe, elephant and whale, lilies and roses, and peach, we are air, we are flame, we are oyster and pearl, we are girls. We are woman and nature” (Griffin, 1978)

The folklore of Assam, like many other oral traditions, was initially transmitted through generations before being compiled into written form. Often described as a ‘super-saga’ of a young girl's endurance against patriarchal cruelty,

the conventional interpretations mostly look at this tale from the perspective of the moral binary of good triumphing over evil. Such readings focus on Tejimola's passive suffering at the hands of her stepmother, usually overlooking the deeper symbolic resonance of her repeated metamorphosis and the ecological imagination embedded within the narrative. The ending where Tejimola is reunited with her father through rebirth, transcends the boundaries of typical fairy tales and the standard “happily ever

after” trope, offering a much more complex resolution.

This paper reimagines *Tejimola* through the lens of Ecofeminism. As a theoretical framework, Ecofeminism critiques the parallel domination of women and nature under patriarchal structures. It challenges deep seated binaries – such as human versus nature, male versus female – by foregrounding the interconnectedness between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the environment. In *Tejimola*, the violence inflicted upon the protagonist's body – mutilated, buried and silenced – becomes synonymous with the violence enacted upon the Earth itself.

Yet, the story does not conclude in victimhood. *Tejimola* re-emerges through ecological metamorphosis transforming various forms of nature. These transformations are not merely “fairy tale magic”; they represent the victims' resistance. Each form articulates a specific mode of Survival achieved through the natural world. *Tejimola* refuses to submit to the attempt to be dominated whether in human form or through various manifestations of nature. These various forms and their significance articulate recyclical regeneration, proving that the female body and the environment are not passive sites of exploitation, but active agents of renewal. Her metamorphosis illuminates a cultural imagination in which women and nature resist erasure by embodying resilience through interconnectedness. In this re-reading of *Tejimola*, we uncover a vision of empowerment

that moves beyond the folkloric moral of good versus evil; instead, it reveals a profound harmony, regeneration, and ecological solidarity.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, text-based analytical framework grounded in Ecofeminist Literary Criticism to re-examine the Assamese folktale *Tejimola*. Drawing from primary written compilations of Assamese folklore the analysis deconstructs traditional patriarchal binaries by mapping the narrative intersections of gendered violence and environmental exploitation. Specifically, the study systematically interrogates *Tejimola*'s four metamorphic stages - the gourd plant, citrus tree, lotus plant and bird - interpreting them not as passive folkloric tropes, but as active symbolic representations of ecological resistance, non-human agency and ecofeminist solidarity.

Ecofeminism: A Theoretical Framework

In the 1970s and 80s Ecofeminism emerged as a theoretical movement as well as political praxis. It combines feminism with ecological concern. Ecofeminism critiques the ways in which patriarchal and capitalist structures systematically treat both women and nature as resources that are to be exploited and dominated. Ecofeminism studies and examines the connections between the oppression of women and destruction of nature and argues that both are rooted in patriarchal, dualistic and hierarchical ideologies. Such tendencies define women and nature as ‘inferior others’ who are

supposed to be dominated by a male centric capitalist or techno centric culture. For this, Ecofeminism proposes a shift from a perspective of dominance to interconnectedness that acknowledges that peace of the planet is inseparable from the peace among the people.

The common idea among the ecofeminists is that of an intention to deconstruct dualisms. This is based on a re-conceptualisation of dualisms inherited from patriarchal Western metaphysics, such as culture/nature, male/female, subject/object, transcendence/immanence, God/world, human/animal, public/private, and production/reproduction (S.Khalil 2018). These dualisms justify domination by associating women with passivity and irrationality, while men are associated with control and rationality. Ecofeminism does not portray women and nature as mere passive victims of exploitation. It rather brings forward their capacity for resistance, regeneration and nurture. This perspective shifts the narrative from victimhood to that of agency by emphasizing cycles of renewal and interconnected survival.

Tejimola as an Ecofeminist Text:

Tejimola provides a rich area for ecofeminist analysis. *Tejimola* was a victim of conspiracy initially by her stepmother and following the consequences she was brutally tortured, her body was mutilated and buried in the earth. However, even after all these *Tejimola*'s story resists closure in death. Through her conductive metamorphosis into a creeper, fruit tree, flower plant, bird she reclaims agency

and voice by aligning herself with the natural world. Each transformation shows her resilience as well as rootedness with the earth. Her metamorphoses showcase the ecofeminists' claim that though both women and nature are oppressed, both of them continually resist erasure by embodying cycles of renewal and interconnectedness. In this way the ecofeminist point of view provides us with the narrative through which *Tejimola* can be re-read not as a tale of passive suffering but as a profound allegory of ecological empowerment and feminist resistance. Her story gives us the example that when the female body intertwines with ecological processes, it destabilizes patriarchal binaries. It focuses on symbiosis rather than domination.

Applications of Ecofeminists theories to *Tejimola*:

In the famous Assamese folktale *Tejimola* a young girl is murdered by her stepmother. She is reborn through cycles of vegetables and floral transformations. This offers a fertile ground for ecofeminist interpretations. The tale dramatizes the entanglement of women and nature and their attempt to break free from such situations. The text *Tejimola* can be seen as following many of the major ecofeminist theories.

Vandana Shiva: Women, Ecology, and the “Invisible Farmer”

Vandana Shiva argues that people often overlook the labour of women. Women, according to Shiva, embody ecological

knowledge through their daily practices. Through the concept of 'Navdanya', Shiva talks about "seed freedom,". "We all belong to the living and this creates duties for us: to follow the laws of nature and to react when they are violated. The world needs protection and we need justice" (Shiva 2023) She claims that women's bodies become soil, seed and plant dramatizing the inseparability of women's lives from ecological cycles. The stepmother's attempt to erase the very existence of Tejimola parallels the systematic attempt to erase women's ecological contributions. However, Tejimola's rebirth through several natural forms insists that women's knowledge and vitality can not be annihilated.

Maria Mies: Patriarchy, Capitalism, and Exploitation

In two of her books *Ecofeminism* (1993, with Vandana Shiva) and *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* Maria Miles stated that women and colonized people's labor is devalued and exploited under capitalism. She critiques patriarchal-capitalist structures that commodify both women and nature and reduce them to mere expandable resources. Tejimola's stepmother treats her as a labourer whose labour is to be consumed and destroyed. It mirrors the exploitation of land for profit. Yet Tejimola resists commodification, she proves that neither women nor nature can be reduced to mere instruments of production. Her persistence consolidates Miles' vision of resistance against patriarchal-capitalist exploitation.

Donna Haraway: "Becoming-With"

The transformations of Tejimola exemplify Donna Haraway's concept of 'becoming with'. Haraway says that nature is not a passive resource. Nature is very much alive. It can be clearly seen through Tejimola as she sings in all her natural forms. This blurring of lines between human and nature affirms kinship between human and non-human world.

Carolyn Merchant: The Death of Nature

Carolyn Merchant critiques the worldview of modern science as mechanistic. She claims that such a view looks at nature as inert, passive and exploitable. The folktale *Tejimola* offers a counter narrative. After her death when she becomes a part of nature, she doesn't remain silent. She sings – warns against causing her harm. This dramatizes Merchant's ecofeminist claim that nature is alive, vocal and resistant to domination. Tejimola's voice even as otherwise mute objects of nature challenges the patriarchal belief 'death of nature'.

Val Plumwood: Dualisms and Human Exceptionalism

Australian philosopher cum ecofeminist Val Plumwood is known for her work on anthropocentrism. She identifies patriarchal dualisms of male-female, culture-nature, human-animal as foundational to domination. Tejimola destabilizes all these boundaries through her metamorphoses. By becoming one with nature she blurs the line between human and non human. Thus resists hierarchical separation. In *Tejimola*

the human is not separate from nature but continues with it.

Greta Gaard: Ecofeminism and Voice:

Ecofeminist Greta Gaard emphasizes that Ecofeminism should give voice to both nature and women. The song that Tejimola persistently sings "Don't pluck me" is a literal ecofeminist voice. Through Tejimola it is nature who is speaking against exploitation. The folktale in this way, becomes a song of resistance where voice becomes bridge between human and ecology.

Looking at *Tejimola* from an ecofeminist point of view, it shines both as a testament to nature's resilience as well as a fierce act of feminist resistance. Here in this story we find Shiva's invisible farmer, Miles' challenge to commodification, Merchant's vision of nature as alive, Plumwood's push to break down rigid binaries and Gaard's passionate ecofeminist voice. Her constant transformations blurs the boundaries between women and the natural world. This shows how these old folktales push back against patriarchal exploitations. Thus we can say that, this Assamese folktales is not a mere tradition— it is also the representation of wider conversations of ecofeminism, grounding the vast ideas of justice and survival in lived culture.

The Narrative of Tejimola

In the canonical version of *Tejimola*, Tejimola is depicted as a docile, dutiful daughter. Her stepmother has always been envious of her. When her father departed on a trading expenditure she was entrusted in the care of the

stepmother. By taking advantage of the situation the stepmother conspired against her and mockingly sent to a wedding. She willingly gave her damaged clothes to wear and later punished her for damaging them. Showing fake anger the stepmother punishes her brutally and ends up killing her intentionally under the *dhenki* which is a traditional Assamese rice pounding instrument. This act transforms a household tool into an instrument of brutality. This showcases how domestic spaces can become sites of oppression.

The *dhenki* as a tool of domination:

The central act of violence occurs in the story when the stepmother lures Tejimola to the *dhenki* (rice pounding instrument made of wood). This incident which looks like the beginning of a mere household quarrel actually demonstrates patriarchal violence enacted through household instruments. *Dhenki* is such an instrument that can be found in almost every household of Assam in older times. It symbolises domestic labour which turns raw agricultural produce into edible food. In everyday use *dhenki* is associated with women's work and rhythms of household life. Even this *dhenki* becomes a weapon of destruction in the hands of a stepmother. This shows how technologies of substance can be repurposed into technologies of domination. This highlights the vulnerability of women within domestic spaces.

Patriarchal Violence and the Domestic Space

After murdering Tejimola under the *dhenki* by crushing her little by little the

stepmother buries her in the backyard. On the surface level it appears that she is simply trying to hide the evidence. However if we dive deeper and look at it from an ecofeminist perspective, we can see that it symbolically absorbed Tejimola into a cultivated land, reducing her again to a resource. We can relate this to Vandana Shiva's claim that women and nature are often treated as producers. Their value lies only in their utility and if they resist they are destroyed.

Metamorphosis as Resistance:

Tejimola's death does not mark her end. Instead, because of her death she undergoes successive metamorphoses. Each of her metamorphosis marks a significant ecological resistance.

The Bottle-Gourd (*Lau*) Plant

As soon as Tejimola was buried in the backyard, a gourd plant grew from her grave. The plant bore excessive fruit overnight. In Assamese households gourd (*lau*) is a symbol of fertility, nourishment and continuity. Such a plant emerging from Tejimola's grave signifies that neither women nor nature can be completely destroyed.

The Citrus (*Jora Tenga*) Tree

After finding out that Tejimola is reborn as a gourd plant stepmother immediately uproots the plant and leaves it to die. But to her surprise a citrus tree (*jora tenga*) grew from it. The citrus fruits are often associated with refreshment and also carrying the undertones of sorrow and sharpness. This could be related to the fact that

resistance is not only fertile but also bittersweet, embodying both survival and grief.

The Lotus (*Padma*) and the River

After this the stepmother gets frustrated and again uproots the citrus tree and throws it in the river. But even there she emerges as a lotus plant. Tejimola blooms beautifully in the river. Though rooted in the mud, the lotus symbolizes purity, enlightenment and regeneration while the river represents the free untamed natural world. This could be seen in complete contrast to her situation in the household— confined to the domestic space only. This marks her movement away from patriarchal dominance and becoming ecologically liberated.

The Bird (*salika*):

After being discovered by her father, Tejimola becomes a bird. The bird symbolises mobility and freedom. After aligning with nature she becomes gradually free. She becomes as free as a bird in the end. Till then she was forced to be in certain situations, but after becoming free she could choose what she wanted to become.

The Voice of the Environment: “Don’t Pluck Me”

One feature that remains continuously unchanged throughout all her forms is her voice. Even as a plant or flower she sings, asserting her identity and resisting exploitation:

*“Hato nemelibi lawo/ jorao/ phoolo nisingibi
kore mogonia/ garakhiya/ naworiya/ mure
moromore pitai he toi, pat kaproror logote mahi
aai khundile Tejimolahe moi.”*

(Don't stretch out your hands or pluck my gourd/fruit/flower oh beggar/ herder/ boatman/ dearest father, my name is Tejimola and my step-mother buried me here, all because I destroyed her finery.)

Tejimola's plea is both ecological and feminist. It is the voice of nature to defend itself. Through Tejimola, nature sings to remind the human that the environment is not a commodity to be consumed, but a living entity with agency.

The Stepmother and the Disenchanted World

Through the stepmother, we not only see personal malice but also the destructive logic of patriarchy.

Distorted Female Power

The stepmother's role in *Tejimola* is of much significance. Traditionally she is seen as an envious and evil stepmother. But she can also be re-read as someone who is fully absorbed into patriarchal structures. She becomes the gatekeeper within the domestic sphere. Her cruelty against Tejimola can be seen as how women themselves can be incorporated into perpetuating patriarchal oppression.

The Destruction of the "Other"

The stepmother's constant attempt to erase the whole existence of Tejimola symbolises her desire to control and dominate by eliminating everything. In ecofeminist terms, she represents the colonising mindset as she wants to dominate and silence both women and nature.

The Father's Boat:

The story ends with the return of Tejimola's father's boat. This is the most awaited incident in the whole plot for Tejimola as well as the readers. However, this also raises the question whether it will return the patriarchal order.

The *Gamosa* and the Return of the Human

After rescuing his daughter the father brings her home. He gives her a *Gamosa* (an Assamese traditional handwoven cotton towel or scarf) and asks her to return to her human form. Then Tejimola reclaims her human identity. By confronting her stepmother she restores justice. The return of the father is crucial to the story. He was initially oblivious to his own daughter's sufferings. However he was the only one who recognised Tejimola's voice through ecological forms.

Contemporary Relevance and Retellings:

Tejimola is reinterpreted in modern readings where special emphasis is given to her from an ecological point of view by transforming her into a symbol of resistance and survival. Contemporary poets such as Nitoo Das and Uddipapa Goswami reimagine Tejimola as a survivor who "never dies" – Tejimola forever. Moreover, Assamese singer Joi Barua has composed an entire song about Tejimola linking her to the environment and earth where he compares the pollution made by humans on earth to the tortures the stepmother has given Tejimola. The retellings of *Tejimola* situate Tejimola as a timeless figure of ecological empowerment.

Conclusion

Tejimola being a profound folktale of Assam offers a rich variety of sources for study. By transforming the story of a girl's murder into a rich ecological narrative, this story challenges deep rooted assumptions that nature is passive and women are inherently powerless. The story could be looked at from the ecofeminist critique of patriarchal dualisms that positions women with nature and men with culture. This dualism positions women and nature as subordinate to men and culture. *Tejimola* destabilizes these binaries and dualisms by embodying resilience through her metamorphoses. Moreover, *Tejimola*'s narrative offers "ecological ethics of survival". This prominent tale by Lakshminath bezbaroa reminds us of the wisdom embedded in the folklore which sees all lives on earth as interconnected. *Tejimola* warns us that when society fails to respect women and nature, both are driven to seek alternative ways to endure. Finally, *Tejimola* demonstrates that folklore is not static but dynamic. Looking at its popularity even nowadays we can be sure that this tale is capable of carrying forward ecological and feminist resistance and power. *Tejimola*'s voice in all her forms such as creeper, tree, flower or as human continues to echo across time. This tale will always remind us that both women and nature, though attempted to be silenced, will always find ways to speak, resist and survive.

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