

The Cunning Of The Thupori: Subverting Patriarchy And Rejecting The Loom In Assamese Folktales

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Abstract:

This paper examines the Assamese folktales *Ghunghuni Jontor* and *Thupori* as sophisticated narratives of social satire and gendered resistance. It argues that these tales function as a critical lens on traditional Assamese patriarchy, specifically targeting the societal mandate that reduces a woman's worth to her domestic labour, particularly weaving and sewing. The analysis centers on the protagonists, *Japori* and *Thupori*, who embody the figure of the 'thupori'—a woman stigmatized for her refusal to conform to this domestic ideal. Rather than engaging in direct rebellion, these characters employ strategic intelligence, deception, and performative acts—such as inventing a "humming spinning wheel" or masquerading as a ghost—to subvert male authority and reject their imposed roles. The tales thus challenge the notions of female passivity and the patriarchal control over women's labour and identity. Ultimately, this study posits that *Ghunghuni Jontor* and *Thupori* are not merely humorous stories but are potent assertions of female agency, celebrating wit and solidarity as effective tools for liberation from unchanging gender roles and for carving a self-determined path.

Key Word: Assamese Folktales, Patriarchal Critique, Gender Roles, Female Agency, Subversion.

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I. Introduction

Assamese folktales, like many oral traditions worldwide, often serve as a mirror to the society that nurtures them, reflecting not only its values but also its contradictions and anxieties. Within this rich narrative landscape, tales such as *Ghunghuni Jontor* and *Thupori* emerge as powerful instruments of social critique, employing satire and humour to dissect entrenched patriarchal norms. These stories specifically target the societal obsession with defining a woman's worth through her domestic labour, particularly her skill in weaving and sewing—a primary condition for marriage in traditional Assamese society. They center on the figure of the 'thupori', a woman who remains unmarried beyond the conventional age and is deemed incompetent for her lack of these specific skills, and challenge the very notion of an "ideal woman." Through the clever, non-confrontational strategies of their protagonists, *Japori* and *Thupori*, these folktales subvert the expectation of female passivity and obedience. This paper will explore how *Ghunghuni Jontor* and *Thupori* function as narratives of resistance, satirizing the male control over women's labour and identity, and celebrating intelligence and strategic wit as potent tools for female liberation from prescribed gender roles. Beauvoir says that: "One is not born, but rather becomes woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine." (Beauvoir 330) In this context, the narratives presented by these two tales are particularly significant. These two tales challenge the social construction of women and satirize patriarchal expectations, giving voice to women's protest. The text of the two tales have been taken from Atul Chandra Hazarika's *Aaitar Sadhu (Ghunghuni Jontor)* and Trailokyeeswari Devi Baruani's *Sandhiyar Sadhu (Thupori)*.

II. Result And Discussion

Ghunghuni Jontor offers a satirical analysis of traditional gender roles in Assamese society and the concept of women's empowerment. The tale satirizes the societal mentality that recognizes a woman's weaving and sewing skills as a primary condition for marriage and challenges the attitude towards a *thupori* (a woman who remains unmarried beyond the usual age and does not know weaving/sewing).

According to the tale's description, *Japori* is a lazy and indolent woman who has no interest in weaving or sewing. Such naming of the female character is particularly meaningful. The name 'Japori' challenges the

notion of 'ideal woman'. 'Japori' means *Japora Tirotā* (a woman with unkempt hair). However, the tale does not present this as a negative trait but rather portrays it as a disgust towards the mechanical duties imposed upon women by society. Japori's husband, Aalandhu, forces her to weave a *Suria* (a *Dhoti*, a long piece of cloth worn by men on the lower part of the body). This highlights the societal mindset that considers women's labour as a natural duty. Japori deceives her husband with the trick of the 'ghunghuni jontor' (a humming spinning wheel) to cover up her inadequacy:

Early the next morning, Aalandhu arrived at his mother-in-law's house. From the entrance itself, he started shouting, "Aai! I have come to take the ghunghuni jontor." The mother of Japori was very clever. As soon as someone said it, she knew what the truth was. Just hearing the name 'ghunghuni jontor', she understood it was a taunt about her lazy daughter. The old woman asked her son-in-law to eat well and rest for a while. In this short time, she quietly thought of a plan. Aalandhu also ate and went to sleep. Seizing this opportunity, the old woman searched for and found a *ghun* (weevil). She put that *ghun* in a tin and wrapped it up. A little later, when Aalandhu woke up, the old woman gave him the tin and said, "Son, this is the ghunghuni jontor. Take it very carefully and give it to her. Do not open and look at the ghunghuni jontor on the way. If you open it, the jontor will not spin thread. (Hazarika 922-923)

Aalandhu, unable to control his curiosity, open the tin and looked. Immediately, the weevil inside the tin flew away. Thinking, 'daatai dileu bidhaatai nidie', Aalandhu told everything to Japori. Japori pretended to cry, but was secretly very pleased. Actually, this is exactly what she had wanted.

This description holds significant meaning. Through this, her (and her mother's) intelligence and immediate ability to cope with the situation are revealed. It also shatters the traditional notion of women's passivity. Later, the incident of her transforming into a female ghost (*bhutuni*) and destroying the yarn hints at Japori's creative protest:

It was the time of the paddy ripening. Every night, Aalandhu would go to the field to guard the ripe paddy. He would stay up all night in a tree house built there. One such night, Japori smeared cooking-pot ash on her face. She wore a torn, very black piece of cloth. She put on garlands of human and cattle bones around her neck, waist, and arms. She wore jhunukas (anklets) on her feet. In this guise, Japori went and started dancing below the tree house where Aalandhu was staying. Seeing what seemed like a female ghost or a specter in that form, Aalandhu was terribly frightened. He couldn't even dream that it was his wife, Japori. Dancing, she sang in a shrill, eerie voice: "Junuk-janaak baon/ tongsi sorok khaon/ tongsi sorok napaon jodi/ ghoror ghoinik khaon/ ghoror ghoiniko napaon jodi/ xuta thaalike khaon." Hearing this song, Aalandhu trembling and stammering, called out, "Don't eat me. Don't eat my wife either. Oh specter, please go and eat the basket of thread!" Hearing this, Japori quickly left from there. She threw the basket of thread kept in the courtyard into the river, washed up, and went to sleep. (923-924)

In the tale, the acts of spinning yarn and weaving cloth function as symbols of the traditional bonds associated with women. But by taking the form of a *bhutuni* (i.e., by wearing the mask of a societal fear), Japori destroys those very bonds. This is an example representing a woman's independent will. Society considers women as labourers, but Japori, on the contrary, gains freedom through intelligence and strategy.

The concluding statement of the tale, "Aalandhu was satiated by the hand-woven cloth, Japori was saved by the *ghunghuni jontor*" (924), brings out the conflict between male control and female liberation. Japori was able to emerge victorious without performing the role of the 'ideal woman' expected by society.

Thus, the tale *Ghunghuni Jontor* satirizes the indirect control men have over women's labour and identity in Assamese society. Japori's character makes it clear that even without open rebellion, women can use strategy and intelligence to break traditions and carve their own path. Although the tale's narrative is humorous, it is a powerful protest, where the very notion of a *thupori* is meaningfully challenged.

In the tale, Japori's mother also plays a significant role. When Japori asked for the 'ghunghuni jontor', her mother sent a box with a *ghun* (weevil) to Aalandhu. This implies that "society's perspective on women's inadequacy is a false and parasitic notion." This stratagem of the mother-in-law actually speaks of solidarity among women.

The tale *Thupori*, through a humorous style, presents the picture of a woman who, having broken away from traditional gender roles, manages her household by merely using her wit, while staying away from work deemed essential for women. Although the core plot of this tale is the same as that of *Ghunghuni Jontor*, the inclusion of the *Thupori* character makes it more robust. In the tale, although Thupori does not know how to weave or sew, she claims she can weave a piece of cloth in a very short time. Hearing this, a man immediately decides to marry her:

In a marsh, many men and women had gathered and were catching fish with *jakoi*, *polo*, and other tools. Among them, a young girl named Thupori said to another, "Oh, I came to catch fish today for no reason; I haven't caught a single fish. If I had stayed home, I could have woven a *borkapor* by now." A man who heard this was amazed and thought, "Oh, she can finish weaving a *borkapor* in a short time? This is no ordinary

woman.” So, he asked others for her address and found her house. Later, he proposed to her, married her, and brought her home. (Baruani 70)

This man’s decision clearly shows that knowing how to weave and sew is a primary condition associated with marriage. It also reveals the mentality of this society. The gendered society values women as ‘weavers’ and emphasizes this as a condition for marriage. However, Thupori did not learn weaving and sewing at her parental home. Nor did she show any interest in weaving cloth at her husband’s home. However, Thupori did not directly express her unwillingness towards weaving and sewing. By pretending to be engaged in all tasks related to weaving, she maintained her position (as the ideal woman/Lakshmi-like daughter-in-law) in the household and concealed her incapability. This means she adopted a clever strategy to reject the ideal role of women defined by patriarchy. The tale humorously portrays the conflict between a woman’s independent self and the gender roles assigned by patriarchy. The central character, Thupori, consciously distanced herself from society’s traditional image of a woman (skilled in weaving, sewing, and household work) and carved her own path, through which a tendency to reject the expectations of the patriarchal society becomes clear.

Breaking the traditional narrative of women’s passivity, Thupori, using her intelligence, managed to get married and, in her marital life, got exemption from all work related to weaving and sewing. Thupori was able to remove male intervention in women’s work, and she also did not have to return to the work predetermined for women. Through this, Thupori clarified an aspect related to women’s self-identity—women seek freedom and want to be free from the politics of constructing unchanging gender roles based on the patriarchy’s unchecked interference in women’s work and socio-cultural norms. For this, Thupori did not engage in direct conflict. Although she faced patriarchal pressure, she controlled every situation with her intelligence. With the help of the village women, she completed tasks like collecting cotton, carding it, and spinning yarn. By pretending to be a ghost and scaring her husband, she freed herself from the pressure of weaving and sewing for life. These steps taken by Thupori suggest that women have capabilities beyond their traditional role (weaving/sewing). Problem-solving skills are particularly noticeable in the character. Her intelligence and acting skills prove that a woman’s strength is manifested not only in physical labour but also in mental agility.

It can be said that the tale primarily expresses a clear criticism of two aspects associated with patriarchy. First, the mentality that emphasizes physical labour as the sole criterion for determining a woman’s worth is rendered invalid. The tale seems to criticize the societal attitude that considers a woman like Thupori, who doesn’t know weaving, as incompetent. Secondly, the tale also criticizes the definition of an ideal daughter-in-law or a Lakshmi-like woman. The woman is named ‘Thupori’ precisely because she does not know weaving and sewing. But the man did not pay attention to this aspect. Merely hearing that she is very adept at weaving cloth, the man formed a presumption and married Thupori immediately based on this mistaken assumption about her weaving skills. After marriage, he asked her to weave cloth. This action reveals the nature of the traditional gender role assigned to women by patriarchy and exposes the man’s unchecked interference in women’s freedom and will. Although Thupori could not directly oppose this tradition, she asserted her protest by taking the form of a ghost—“If you let your wife do the weaving, I will eat them both.” (72) Faced with this roar of the ghost-shaped Thupori, the man was forced to promise not to interfere with the woman’s will and freedom—“I won’t never let my wife do the weaving work, O Goddess, I won’t. I won’t even mention the name of the loom shed.” (72)

At the end of the tale, Thupori achieved permanent freedom from patriarchal expectations. Because her husband was forced to tell her—“From today, do not even mention weaving. I will buy whatever you need.” (72)

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Assamese folktales *Ghunguni Jontor* and *Thupori* transcend their humorous veneer to deliver a profound and satirical critique of patriarchal expectations. Through the clever deceptions of Japori and the strategic performances of Thupori, these narratives systematically dismantle the societal mentality that equates a woman’s value with her proficiency in weaving and sewing. The tales powerfully subvert the stereotype of the passive woman, instead showcasing female intelligence, solidarity, and creative problem-solving as effective means of resistance. By having their protagonists adopt the guise of a ghost—a symbol of societal fear—to break the very bonds of their prescribed duties, the stories champion a woman’s independent will. The ultimate victory of both characters, who secure permanent freedom from weaving without ever conforming to the “ideal woman” archetype, underscores the tales’ central argument: true empowerment lies not in submitting to traditional roles, but in the strategic intelligence to carve one’s own path. Thus, these folktales remain enduring testaments to the quiet yet potent rebellion that can flourish even within the most rigid patriarchal frameworks.

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