



A comparative folklore criticism of Anishe Xamunu and Tsüipu ngo Khaulipu in Sümi oral tradition

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Abstract

Sümi folktales exhibit remarkable narrative density, symbolic continuity, and moral complexity, particularly in tales concerned with love, transgression, death, and transformation. This paper undertakes a comparative folklore criticism of two Sümi narratives Anishe Xamunu and Tsüipu and Khaulipu (The Fairy Wife) which, despite their independent circulation, share striking thematic, structural, and symbolic parallels. Both tales depict women who undergo posthumous metamorphosis into plants or trees, foreground the act of overhearing or violating prohibitions as a narrative catalyst, and feature antagonists whose deception and violence disrupt social and cosmic order. Drawing upon structuralist folklore theory, performance-centred approaches, and feminist folklore criticism, this study analyses how villainy, climax, and catharsis operate within these narratives to encode Sümi moral philosophy and cosmological beliefs.

The paper argues that transformation into flora functions not merely as etiological explanation but as a form of moral memory embedded in the landscape. Villainy is constructed not only through overt violence, as in the murder of Nisheli or Khaulipu, but also through disobedience, curiosity, and patriarchal authority. Climactic moments are marked by irreversible breaches such as recognition of deception, breaking of taboos, or the revelation of true identity while catharsis is achieved through communal recognition, sorrow, and ecological continuity rather than narrative closure. By placing these two folktales in dialogue, the study demonstrates how Sümi oral tradition negotiates gender, power, fidelity, and loss through recurring narrative motifs that reinforce cultural ethics while allowing emotional release.

Keywords: Sümi folklore, metamorphosis, villainy, comparative folklore, moral ecology

Introduction

The Bhagavad Gita occupies a central position in the intellectual and spiritual traditions of India and has achieved enduring global recognition as a profound philosophical and ethical text. Embedded within the epic Mahabharata, it transcends its narrative setting to address universal concerns such as duty, morality, action, and the nature of reality. Its dialogic structure, presented as a conversation between Arjuna and Krishna, in Folktales across cultures often reveal shared narrative motifs, i.e. transformation, deception, forbidden knowledge, and tragic love, yet the intensity with which such motifs recur within a single cultural tradition is particularly revealing. Sümi folktales, transmitted orally across generations, demonstrate an extraordinary consistency in symbolic language and narrative structure, suggesting a deeply rooted moral and cosmological framework. Among these narratives, Anishe Xamunu and Tsüipu and Khaulipu stand out for their striking thematic parallels: women transformed into plants after violent or unjust death, antagonists who overhear or intrude upon private plans, and climactic moments triggered by the violation of explicit or implicit prohibitions.

While these tales differ in length, complexity, and narrative scope, they appear to speak to one another across time and performance contexts. Both stories centre on romantic relationships constrained by social hierarchies, wealth disparities, or ritual obligations. Both depict the failure of male protagonists Pheo and Tsüipu to protect the women they love, whether through powerlessness, disobedience, or misplaced trust. Most significantly, both narratives embed moral judgement not through divine punishment alone but through transformation into elements of the natural world,

thereby sacralising landscape as a repository of cultural memory.

This paper adopts a comparative folklore approach to examine how these two Sümi folktales articulate themes of villainy, climax, and catharsis. Drawing on the works of Propp (1968)^[6], Ben-Amos (1971)^[5], and Bauman (1986)^[4], the study treats these narratives not as static texts but as dynamic performances shaped by communal ethics. Feminist folklore perspectives further illuminate how female suffering and endurance are central to narrative resolution. By analysing these tales side by side, the study seeks to demonstrate that their similarities are not coincidental but symptomatic of a shared symbolic grammar through which the Sümi people articulate loss, injustice, and continuity.

Folktale 1: Anishe Xamunu

Long ago, there lived a wealthy Sümi woman named Nisheli. In the same village was Pheo, a young man from a poor family. They had known each other since childhood, having grown up and played together, and in time their friendship deepened into love.

But Pheo carried a quiet fear. He knew their love would likely end in sorrow because his poverty made it impossible for Nisheli's parents to accept him as a suitor. Believing that his worst thoughts might someday come true, he lived with constant anxiety.

One evening, Pheo met Nisheli in the darkness to discuss a secret plan. Unfortunately, a man named Kutupa overheard everything. Pheo whispered to her, "Anisheo, tomorrow evening I will knock on your door. Be ready to follow me wherever I go." Nisheli agreed, and Pheo instructed her to

prepare her clothes and belongings that very night. He told her he would come at midnight, and she must follow him without hesitation. Then he left.

Kutupa, having listened to their plan, disguised himself as Pheo and hurried to Nisheli's room. When he knocked, Nisheli assumed it was truly Pheo. She grabbed her bundle of clothes and joyfully stepped out into the night. Kutupa said nothing; he only signaled for her to follow and nudged her forward.

They walked for a long time, until Nisheli grew tired and suggested they rest by making a small fire. Kutupa refused, saying only "qale"—"hold on"—because he wanted to cross the village fields first. When he spoke, his voice did not sound like Pheo's, and Nisheli began to feel uneasy, though she continued to follow him.

At dawn, after they had reached a thick forest beyond the fields, Nisheli finally recognised the man beside her—it was Kutupa. Startled and terrified, she cried out. Kutupa pleaded with her to come with him, but when Nisheli continued to sob uncontrollably, his frustration turned to rage. He tied her to a tree and killed her, then returned alone to the village.

Nisheli's blood flowed around the base of the tree, and from it sprouted a new flower called Anishe (*Rhipsalis baccifera*).

Many days later, Pheo joined the villagers on a hunting trip. As they moved deeper into the forest, they unknowingly arrived at the very place where Nisheli had died. Suddenly, heavy rain began to fall. Pheo took shelter under a tree—which happened to be the same tree tied to Nisheli's death. The Anishe flowers growing there bent over him like an umbrella, shielding only him from the rain while all the others were soaked. Astonished, the villagers drove him away from the tree, but wherever Pheo moved, the flowers followed and continued to shelter him. Their strange behavior amazed everyone.

When the rain finally ended, Pheo cut one of the flowers with his spear and took it home.

That night, he dreamed of Nisheli. In the dream, she revealed that Kutupa had been the reason they could never marry. She also reproached him gently, saying, "Even when others were around, I tried to protect you, why did you harm me? Look at your ears and your spear."

The next morning, Pheo awoke to find blood on both his ears and the tip of his spear. Filled with grief, he realised that Nisheli still remembered him, even in death. From that day on, he lived in deep sorrow and eventually died with a broken heart.

The flower born from Nisheli's blood is still known as Anishe, and it continues to grow in some regions of the Sümi areas.

Folktale 2: Tsüipu and Khaulipu (The Fairy Wife)

Long ago in the hills of the Sümi lived two young lovers—Tsüipu, a strong and handsome youth, and Khaulipu, famed for her extraordinary beauty. Though they came from different villages, Tsüipu loved her deeply and often visited her home to ask for her hand in marriage. After many visits, her parents finally agreed.

Before the wedding, however, a crucial meeting was held to discuss the bride-price. During this discussion, Khaulipu's parents told Tsüipu that he must weave a bamboo basket to carry his bride home after the rituals. They warned him strictly that he must not rest on the way nor open the basket until he reached his village.

The marriage was completed, and Tsüipu set off with Khaulipu, carrying her inside the basket as instructed. But midway through the journey, he grew tired. Forgetting the strict warning, he set the basket down and peeked inside to see his bride. After resting, when he tried to lift the basket again, it felt impossibly heavy. Unable to manage it alone, he left the basket behind to fetch his brother.

While he was gone, a troublesome spirit named Muchupili discovered the basket. She killed Khaulipu and took her place, disguising herself in the bride's clothing. When Tsüipu returned with his brother and opened the basket, the brother was shocked to see an ugly woman instead of the beautiful bride. Disgusted, he scolded Tsüipu and left. Confused, Tsüipu looked in and was startled by Khaulipu's strange appearance.

Sensing his doubts, Muchupili cleverly explained, "When I tried to open my eyes, they stretched wide; when I tried to speak, my mouth grew sharp; when I tried to sit, my leg broke." Blinded by love, Tsüipu believed her and carried her home with great effort. The two then lived together as husband and wife.

Time passed, and from the place where the real Khaulipu had died, a bamboo plant sprouted, producing many shoots. One day, Tsüipu unknowingly gathered shoots from that very spot and brought them home for his "wife" to cook. As the shoots boiled, they whispered, "May Muchupili die in childbirth! Strike down Muchupili!" Alarmed, Muchupili told Tsüipu, who couldn't understand the message, and simply told her to throw the curry away. She tossed it into a heap of husks.

From the spot where the curry landed, a lemon tree sprang up and soon bore abundant fruit. Tsüipu generously shared the fruit with the villagers, though he accidentally overlooked a poor widow. When she asked for one, he plucked the last fruit from the tree and gave it to her.

The widow kept the lemon in a small hanging basket. Whenever she left for the fields, the lemon transformed into Khaulipu, who would murmur, "My father, my mother are coming," and complete all the housework. Before the widow returned, she turned back into a lemon.

Seeing her home magically cleaned each day, the widow promised food to anyone who was helping her, but no one came forward. So she pretended to leave for the fields and secretly watched. She caught sight of the lemon turning into Khaulipu and quickly seized her. Khaulipu pleaded gently, "I am reborn, remade. Please don't hold me too tightly." From then on, she remained in human form and lived with the widow, who kept her mostly indoors.

Meanwhile, Tsüipu once came near the widow's house while playing spinning-top with village children. Khaulipu recognised his voice but avoided revealing herself. Whenever the children's tops rolled into the hut, she let them retrieve them, but whenever Tsüipu's top rolled in, she tossed it back quickly. One time, distracted by her weaving, she failed to notice his top spin inside. When Tsüipu entered to fetch it, he finally saw her.

He told the widow, "This woman resembles my first wife. I want to marry her. What will you ask in return?" The widow requested shohüsü pikhi and shohüsü khumu (wooden mortar and pestle). After providing them, Tsüipu married Khaulipu again—keeping both wives.

To prevent conflict, Tsüipu created separate paths for each wife to gather firewood. One day, Khaulipu returned early. Tsüipu planned to kill Muchupili and instructed her to enter

the house from the back. Khaulipu warned her to come from the front, but Muchupili replied, “I obey only men, not women,” and entered from the back. Tsüipu killed her with a machete. From her grave grew a strong wild sumac tree (Thumsü in Sümi with scientific name *Rhus semialata*), which he later cut down to make a ladder for the granary. He warned Khaulipu never to climb it when he wasn't home.

But when Tsüipu was away on a head-hunting expedition, the villagers urged Khaulipu to go to the granary to take rice for celebratory rice-beer. She finally agreed. As she climbed the ladder, it snapped and she fell to her death.

When Tsüipu returned and learned what had happened, he scolded his mother for letting her climb despite his instructions. Later he travelled to Khaulipu's parental home and astonishingly found her there once again. Wanting to marry her yet again, he asked her mother for permission. But her mother refused and instead offered another daughter, Aghüghalho, with one condition: she must never step outside while the sun was shining.

Tsüipu married Aghüghalho and agreed to the condition. But one day, curious about the outside world, she stepped out into the sunlight and melted into water. As Tsüipu watched, a flower emerged from the puddle—the flower now known as Lapu, which still grows today.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in folklore criticism and comparative narrative analysis. Rather than seeking historical origins or diffusionist explanations, the paper focuses on meaning production within the cultural context of the Sümi people. Ben-Amos's (1971)^[5] insistence on understanding folklore “in context” informs the analysis, foregrounding the social and ethical functions of storytelling. Propp's (1968)^[6] morphological approach assists in identifying narrative roles, i.e. hero, villain, and victim, while Bauman's (1986)^[4] performance theory underscores the importance of audience reception and emotional effect.

Villainy, climax, and catharsis are treated not merely as literary devices but as culturally coded moments through which moral instruction and emotional release are achieved. Transformation motifs are analysed through symbolic anthropology, particularly the notion that nature serves as a moral archive in oral societies. Comparative analysis proceeds thematically rather than chronologically, allowing parallels and divergences to emerge organically.

Narrative Parallels and Structural Convergence

At a structural level, both Anishe Xamunu and Tsüipu and Khaulipu unfold through a sequence of anticipation, transgression, violence, and transformation. In Anishe Xamunu, the overhearing of a private conversation by Kutupa initiates the tragedy. In Tsüipu and Khaulipu, Tsüipu's violation of ritual instructions such as ‘resting’ and ‘opening the basket’ creates narrative rupture. In both cases, secrecy and obedience function as moral boundaries, the crossing of which invites catastrophe.

The female protagonists Nisheli and Khaulipu are positioned as vulnerable bearers of social expectation. Their deaths are not random acts of violence but the culmination of systemic imbalance: poverty versus wealth, male authority versus female agency, desire versus social order. Transformation into plant life follows immediately or

eventually, signalling that while human life is extinguished, moral presence endures.

Villainy in these two Folktales

Villainy in these narratives is multifaceted and culturally nuanced. Kutupa represents overt villainy: deception, impersonation, sexual entitlement, and murder. His act of overhearing marks him as a transgressor of social boundaries, and his violence is unambiguous. Muchupili, by contrast, embodies supernatural villainy; deceptive, parasitic, and opportunistic. Yet Tsüipu himself participates in villainy through disobedience and blindness born of desire.

Importantly, villainy is not always punished immediately. Kutupa escapes social retribution, and Muchupili lives as a wife for years. This delayed justice reflects a Sümi worldview in which moral reckoning unfolds through time, often mediated by nature rather than human institutions.

Climax: Recognition and Irreversibility

The climactic moments in both tales are marked by recognition (anagnorisis) and irreversible loss. Nisheli's recognition of Kutupa at dawn signals the end of hope and the beginning of tragedy. Tsüipu's repeated recognitions, i.e. of deception, of loss, and of resurrection create a cyclical pattern of hope and despair.

These climaxes are not triumphant but devastating. The emotional peak lies not in victory but in awareness, aligning with Aristotle's notion of tragic recognition while remaining culturally distinct (Aristotle, 1996)^[3].

Catharsis and Moral Ecology

Catharsis in Sümi folktales is achieved through sorrow, continuity, and ecological embedding. Pheo's grief and eventual death provide emotional release, while the Anishe flower stands as a living reminder of love and injustice. In Tsüipu and Khaulipu, multiple plant transformations such as the bamboo, lemon tree, Thumsü, and Lapu flower map suffering onto the landscape.

Rather than resolving pain, these tales invite communal mourning and remembrance. Catharsis emerges not from closure but from recognition that moral truth persists beyond human life.

Gender, Power, and Silence

Both tales foreground female suffering within patriarchal structures. Nisheli and Khaulipu rarely act with full agency; their obedience becomes fatal. Yet their posthumous transformations grant them enduring presence and voice—flowers that protect, bamboo that speaks, lemons that labour. In death, they gain a form of power denied in life.

Conclusion

The foregoing comparative reading of Anishe Xamunu and Tsüipu and Khaulipu demonstrates that Sümi folktales are not isolated narrative artefacts but part of a wider, internally coherent symbolic and ethical system. Building upon this existing conclusion, it becomes evident that the future of Sümi literary scholarship must move beyond preservation and retelling towards a more rigorous practice of comparative folklore criticism. Such an approach enables Sümi academia to systematise oral narratives into analytical categories, thereby expanding the literary and theoretical dimensions of the discipline.

Comparative folklore criticism, when applied within the Sümi context, should be carried out through a thematic and interdisciplinary framework. Rather than merely juxtaposing stories, scholars must identify recurring motifs such as metamorphosis, taboo violation, moral transgression, ecological memory, gendered suffering, and delayed justice and examine how these themes function across narratives. In line with Dan Ben-Amos's (1971) ^[5] insistence on contextual meaning, Sümi folktales must be analysed within their socio-cultural performance settings, while Vladimir Propp's (1968) ^[6] structural model may be adapted to map narrative functions such as villainy, lack, mediation, and transformation. Similarly, performance-oriented insights from Richard Bauman (1986) ^[4] allow scholars to consider audience reception, emotional resonance, and communal memory as central to interpretation.

To expand the Sümi literary realm, comparative studies should also incorporate thematic clusters. For instance, a "metamorphosis corpus" could examine tales where human-to-nature transformation encodes moral memory; a "villainy corpus" could explore the spectrum from human deception to supernatural intrusion; and a "gendered narrative corpus" could interrogate the representation of women's agency, suffering, and posthumous power. Such categorisation not only strengthens academic rigour but also situates Sümi folklore within broader conversations in world folklore studies. It will mark a decisive shift from plain storytelling to critical engagement. It will transform folktales into texts of inquiry where meaning is not passively received but actively constructed through scholarly interpretation. Importantly, this approach also will enable Sümi folklore to enter academic discourse beyond regional boundaries, contributing to global discussions on oral literature, ethics, and ecological imagination.

The expansion of Sümi academia in the literary realm depends upon the systematic application of comparative folklore criticism grounded in thematic analysis, structural interpretation, and cultural contextualisation. By placing narratives in dialogue with one another, scholars can uncover the underlying grammar of Sümi thought, one that binds human experience to landscape, memory, and morality. This methodological shift not only preserves tradition but reanimates it as a dynamic field of intellectual engagement, ensuring that Sümi folktales continue to speak with relevance, depth, and scholarly authority in contemporary literary studies.

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