People of all ages and cultures tell tales to give meaning to their lives and the cultural environment in which they live. The experiences and events of lives and the world do not have a narrative structure unless they are construed while rendering them. In this process every individual develops a narrative identity. Narrative identity is the unity of personal life as it is experienced and articulated in stories that express this experience (Widdershoven 1993:7).

The folktale rendered by a woman shows how narrative identity blends with women’s identity to form the gender-specific genre namely, women’s tales or women-centered tales. Some of the folktales taken here for analysis reveal that they are used for (I) gender construction, (II) as an art of subversion and (III) for construction of self identity.

(I) Folktales- Social Construction of Gender

The enunciation of implicit self with explicit events in the narratives is exemplified in women-centered tales that are often told by women for women. Gender construction is a process in which males and females are provided with knowledge about their differential positioning and the ethno-cultural conditions that determine such discrepancies in family and society. Family is the primary locus of power where gender roles are determined and relations between different kin groups manipulated.

In most folktales, interactions among women characters are more obvious than that of men. Men are simply figureheads and the narrative itself appears to be a dialogue among women. The entire tale world and story realm appear as though the narratives are strategies to regulate social roles.

The tale (I) Mogudu Pellala Katha (The story of Husband and Wife) (Version 1) is told by Adapa Parvatamma (55) who hails from the peasant community and lives in Siripuram, Sattenapalli mandalam, Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh. She is the eldest daughter-in-law of a joint family. The tale shows the expectations of male and female regarding the gender roles to be performed in an agrarian society where division of labour is honoured and privileged. The family represents the expectations of the teller of the tale for a nuclear family, which is not incongruent with the village setup. This seems to be the root cause of tension between the genders in the tale. The tale seeks a solution to overcome such tension by violating normative gender roles in a role reversal. This, however, could not yield results owing to the dichotomy that exists in the expectations of the village vis-à-vis the family. Hence, the tale corrects itself by reverting to the roles as prescribed by society.

The conflict between individual expectations for gendered roles and societal expectations for individuals is clearly demonstrated. Failure in attempts to carry on exchanged roles not only spoiled the day of the couple but also made them the laughing stock of the village. The village head finally warns them to mind their work in a way determined by tradition and not to become role models for such anti-normative tendencies.

This tale is told by a woman to another woman about the gender expectations which revolve round changing roles. The narrator swings between her expectations and her ground realities and conveniently goes back to tradition by abiding within its value system and gender roles.

Another version of the above tale is collected from Adapa Sundaramma (70), the mother-in-law of the above teller. In her version, a slight variation is seen. This variation reflects the worldview of the teller and her expectations towards a daughter- in- law. The proposal for exchange of gendered roles is from the farmer, not from the wife. The husband views his ‘self’ as a producer and his wife, the ‘other’, as a consumer, but forgets the role played by the wife in making him work well in the field. He represents an ‘ideal male’ in a patriarchal system who thinks highly of himself and considers himself a nexus for the survival of the family. The farmer is a failure in performing the altered role at home, whereas the female is successful even in her altered role. The wife here is shown as a woman who has the wisdom to understand the gender prescriptions and repercussions that occur if anyone strays from them. She further knows the complementary and contradictory relations that exist among men and women in executing their gender roles. Her understanding of the roles and relations of men and women in society allow her to retain her ‘gender identity’ even in her ‘reversed role’. She is able to face the new situation boldly and seeks the cooperation of others. She conceals the ignorance of her husband to protect the prestige of her family. The stupid farmer
discloses everything to the neighbors and proudly refuses to take help from them. He had no respect for feminine duties and does not bother acknowledging the supportive role that a wife plays in successful family life. The wife’s gender-specific behavior in domestic and public spheres satisfied the norms of the dominant society, providing the ‘role model’ for an Indian woman. The teller belongs to the older generation and she expects women to be acquiescent to bring trespassers back into tradition.

The two versions of this tale represent not only a dialogue, but also a negotiation between gender ideology and reality in changing times. They appear to show the re-fixing of the prefixed gender boundaries to women and men but the characters and their interaction in different events in storyline emphasize the need for protecting families from gender anarchy that would disrupt the peace of the village.

(II) Women’s Folktales: An Art of Subversion

Folktales seem an effective medium for women to organize their fantasies, daydreams, expectations, wishes and memories in the normative world and exalt their social positioning in the world of imagination. Hence the tales told by women are indices of explicit and implicit cultural realities that they face in patriarchal society.

Yasodamma (40) belongs to the Balija (inland trading) community. She said that income from the family’s three acres of dry land and a few cattle is hand-to-mouth. Her parents and in-laws are petty vendors who sell grains, pulses and other food accessories. She narrated Komati pilla, Raju katha (Tale of Komati (the traditional trading community) girl and a King) (Tale IV) to her children and teenage girls in her neighbourhood. It tells of a married woman who rescued her husband by outwitting another woman who does not come from a family tradition.

The tale is made of two stories, the first having animal characters and the second human characters. The linkage between the two is constructed with the help of a ‘judgment episode’ in which the female dies with unfulfilled desire to revive her family relations. The tale ends with the reunion of the wife with husband who realized his fault and lives happily with her.

The tale depicts two different conceptions of the institution of marriage and family by the male and female genders. The former view is from the egocentric patriarchal male chauvinistic perspective, marginalising the involvement of the other gender (female) in leading a happy family life. It does not see the female as a ‘subject’ who has a pivotal role to play in the perpetuation of traditions in the family and society. The female views the same patriarchy positively as a means of protection and safety to the institution of family.

The female protagonist has understanding of the pros and cons of patriarchy and she uses the same patriarchal institution as a strategy to outwit the alternate/counter institution of concubinage and brings her husband back to the fold of tradition or family. She took a lead role in reviving her wedded life and proved to be a successful life partner. The male as a consort in this tale violated the bondage of marriage institution strategically to establish male ascendancy over females through (1) legality, (2) matrimony and (3) concubinage.

(1) The male crow exercised its right of patriarchy of its child and family through legality established by madhyastham (mediation), but later violated the duty of a husband, leaving his wife and mercilessly separating the child from its mother, causing not only breakup of the family but also the death of its consort.

(2) The prince violated the rules of endogamous marriage and married a girl from the Komati (Vaisya, third in the linear varna system) community.

(3) As a part of his revenge, the prince resorted to concubinage, which is a counter institution to family tradition.

In the tale, the female protagonist is shown as the restorer of the tradition who used the same patriarchal legality and marriage system as strategies to bring her husband into the boundaries of family tradition from concubinage. The observance of the tradition which the male refused to follow is reinforced by the female protagonist. Thus she restituted the ideals of marriage that were being violated by her husband.

In the tale, the female’s winning over the male in disguise shows that men and women are equal potentates and that their gender roles and duties are socio-cultural constructs that determine their relations in family and society. The tale further establishes the ambivalent power of tradition that could make and break families if not judiciously manipulated according to cultural norms. The culturally constructed feminine traits like patience, forbearance and wisdom enhance the power of the woman to act accordingly and outwit contenders, even of their own gender, but operating in different gender relations.

(III) Women and Social Identity in Folktales

The stories told by women often show a perfect fusion and articulation of self with the tradition and culture of a society in which they are constructed (Durga 2006:87-140). Thus the selves are storied as tales since experiences have little value as long as they are not connected by narrative. Identity and narrative/storied accounts get entwined as the individual reflects, revises and refines a present and future identity. Women aspire for identity at personal and social levels through the narrations of folktales. Stories always imply a temporal
organization of events, and a plot structure that meaningfully relates past, present, and future. At the same time, stories are organized around actors who, as protagonist and antagonist, have opposite positions in a real or imaginary space. Both the storyteller and the actors in the stories told are intentional beings who are motivated to reach particular goals which function as organizing story themes in their narratives.

References


