

Gender, Transformation, and the Body: Investigating Selected Magahi Folk Tales

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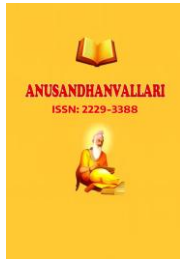
Abstract

Bodily transformations are very common in folk tales, and they act symbolically to bring about some turn of events or act as motifs. This paper investigates three such selected Magahi Folk tales from Sheela Verma's book 'Magahi Folklore and Folk Tales', namely, *The King's Daughter Dove*, *The Seven Swans*, and *Princess Belmanti*. Here, these bodily transformations from (bird to girl, swan to prince, and fruit to princess) function as a metaphor for fluid gender, rebirth and moral renewal (Verma, 2008). Hence, the paper argues that these tales locate the female body as a site where nature, morality, and divinity converge by building a composite framework that combines Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990), structuralist folklore (Propp, 1968; Lévi-Strauss, 1963), ecofeminist perspectives (Merchant, 1980; Shiva, 1988), and Indian feminist scholarship (Rege, 1998; Menon, 2012; Vatsyayan, 1997). The metamorphoses illustrate the volatility of binary gender, the ceremonial evaluation of virtue, and the sacred acknowledgement of feminine agency. This is especially visible in contexts where divine entities (e.g., Parvati-Shiva) endorse transformation as restoration. The study employs close reading and motif analysis based on Propp's functions and Lévi-Strauss's oppositional structures. It also considers Butlerian performance and ecofeminist semiotics. The analysis reveals that: transformation disrupts fixed gender identities by presenting identity as a process of continual becoming; the woman's transformed body serves as an ethical threshold, enduring sanctions, vows, and trials that ultimately lead to social reintegration; and divine intervention reaffirms feminine virtue as sacred, resonating with Indian aesthetic interpretations of Shakti/Prakriti (Vatsyayan, 1997; Shiva, 1988). The study presents a comparative folkloristic framework that contextualises Magahi materials within the realm of global scholarship. It also emphasises indigenous theories of gender and the sacred. It elucidates how regional folk archives, when analysed through integrated theoretical frameworks, can broaden discussions on gender performativity beyond Euro-American contexts.

Keywords— Magahi folklore; bodily transformation; gender performativity; ecofeminism; Propp; Lévi-Strauss; Shakti/Prakriti; Parvati-Shiva; Indian feminist theory

Introduction

Folk tales have always been more than just fun stories. These narratives are living records of how people think about morality, gender, divinity, and the relationship between people and nature. In the Magahi-speaking areas of Bihar and Jharkhand, people have been telling stories together for a long time. They do it in courtyards on harvest evenings, or elders tell stories to younger people. Through these oral stories, people share not only moral lessons but also emotional truths about justice, resilience, and belonging. Magahi folk literature is not merely a passive reflection of ancient traditions; it represents a dynamic dialogue between the past and the present, as well as between collective memory and contemporary social realities (Atreya et al., 2019).



Magahi, which comes from Magadhi Prakrit, the language of Buddha's sermons and Mauryan edicts, has strangely stayed out of the mainstream literary canon (Kumar et al., 2021). For hundreds of years, the stories, songs, and performances of women were only heard orally. Their wisdom lived on in songs, myths, and fables instead of written texts. Sheela Verma (2008) writes in *Magahi Folklore and Folk Tales* that the language's oral traditions have kept a way of seeing the world based on dharma, domestic virtue, ecological harmony, and the sacredness of women. The collection that this paper uses is more than just a translation of folk material; it is also an act of cultural recovery—an effort to bring indigenous knowledge back to light after being hidden for so long.

The King's Daughter Dove, *The Seven Swans*, and *Princess Belmanti* are three of Verma's stories that stand out because they all focus on change. These stories show metamorphosis not as a random miracle, but as a moral and spiritual journey—a process of becoming that tests virtue and shows the truth. The change from bird to woman, swan to prince, and fruit to princess shows that there are deeper issues of identity and power at work. In these stories, the body is both a wall and a bridge. It can be punished, hidden, made holy, or saved. The female protagonists—dove-girl, silent sister, fruit-born princess—bear the burden of societal expectations; however, their transformations ultimately restore moral and divine legitimacy.

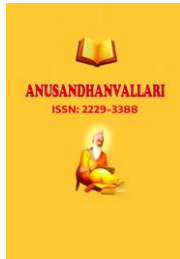
What sets these stories apart from Western stories like the Six Swans or The Wild Swans (Tatar, 2012) is that they all have a strong sense of divine oversight. In the Magahi worldview, change is seldom incidental; it is endorsed by cosmic order, frequently facilitated through Parvati and Shiva. Their intervention represents the reestablishment of equilibrium, indicating that transformation is not a divergence from dharma but its realisation. Thus, while the tales explore bodily change, they simultaneously reinforce a moral ecology grounded in the Hindu conception of *ṛta*—the cosmic rhythm that governs creation, preservation, and dissolution.

This paper interprets these three narratives as explorations of gender, transformation, and corporeality, utilising a hybrid theoretical framework that synthesises Western and Indian philosophies. Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity elucidates how the protagonists enact identity through silence, labour, and ritual acts; Vladimir Propp (1968) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) help reveal the structural and oppositional patterns that shape these stories; and Indian thinkers such as Sharmila Rege (1998), Nivedita Menon (2012), Vandana Shiva (1988), Carolyn Merchant (1980), and Kapila Vatsyayan (1997) deepen the analysis by situating these transformations within the intertwined domains of caste, ecology, and aesthetics. The paper seeks to utilise these frameworks to interpret Magahi folk narratives as philosophical texts, articulating an indigenous perspective on gender and morality that both complements and occasionally contests prevailing Western theories. The Magahi folk tale, modest in its beginnings but deep in its meanings, allows us to see change not as a way to get away from something or be punished, but as a moral rebirth. Through metamorphosis, the body transforms into sacred text, and storytelling evolves into a moral imperative of survival and renewal.

Review of Related Literature

Scholarly interest in Magahi folk literature is still in its early stages when compared to research on Hindi, Bhojpuri, or Maithili traditions. Verma's *Magahi Folklore and Folk Tales* (2008) is the first systematic English translation and commentary of Magahi folklore and folk tales. It gives us a look into local beliefs and how men and women interact with each other. Magahi tales have examined male stereotypes, contending that depictions of masculinity reflect patriarchal norms in agrarian societies. Their research prompts additional exploration into female embodiment and transformation, which this paper addresses.

The concept of metamorphosis as a narrative device has been examined in the Grimm brothers' *The Six Swans* (Tatar, 2012) and the Jataka tales, wherein transformations between animals and humans serve as allegories for karma and compassion (Cowell, 1895). Feminist folklorists like Marina Warner (1994) and Jack Zipes (2002)



see transformation as a symbol of how women's freedom is limited by patriarchal systems. In the Indian context, Rege (1998) redefines “doing gender” within caste-patriarchy, whereas Menon (2012) focuses on gender negotiation instead of opposition. Ecofeminist theorists, such as Merchant (1980) in the West and Shiva (1988) in India, emphasise the interdependence between women and nature, a notion that aligns with the Magahi connection between femininity and fertility. Kapila Vatsyayan (1997) connects this idea to aesthetic theory by seeing transformation as the rhythmic expression of Shakti's creative cycle (sṛṣṭi-sthiti-saṃhāra).

These overlapping points of view imply that bodily transformation in folklore serves as social critique, spiritual allegory, and ecological metaphor concurrently. Combining them allows for an interpretation of Magahi stories that is based on culture but also works in a global context.

Research Objectives

1. To analyse how corporeal transformations in the Magahi Folk Tales express gender fluidity, moral evaluation, and divine approval within the Magahi cultural context.
2. To create an interdisciplinary model that integrates structuralist folklore analysis with ecofeminist and Indian feminist aesthetics, thereby positioning Magahi folk narratives within the context of global theoretical discourse.

Research Methodology

The study utilises qualitative textual analysis, with Verma's (2008) English compilation serving as the principal source. Three levels of analysis are used:

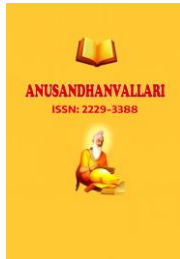
- Structural Mapping: Following Propp's (1968) thirty-one functions, each tale's sequence of interdiction, violation, trial, and return is charted. Lévi-Strauss's (1963) method of binary oppositions—nature/culture, animal/human, purity/pollution—identifies the deep structures of meaning.
- Performative Reading: Utilising Butler (1990) and Rege (1998), the analysis examines how the protagonists' actions—silence, labour, and vow-keeping—construct gender as both performance and negotiation.
- Ecofeminist-Aesthetic Interpretation: Drawing on Merchant (1980), Shiva (1988), and Vatsyayan (1997), natural imagery (birds, fruit, forests) and divine mediation (Parvati–Shiva) are interpreted as manifestations of ecological regeneration and Shakti aesthetics.

The research is interpretive rather than statistical, recognising the oral and variable characteristics of folk narratives. Comparative references to European and Buddhist analogues are heuristic, not homogenizing. Ethical considerations encompass cultural respect for regional storytelling traditions and precise attribution to Verma's (2008) documentation.

Theoretical Framework

Gender Performativity

Judith Butler (1990) asserts that gender identity is constructed through repetitive actions limited by societal norms. The changes that the Magahi heroines go through show how performativity works: the dove-girl goes back and forth between being an animal and a woman, and her recognition depends on following the rituals; the silent sister in The Seven Swans shows femininity through endurance instead of speech. Sharmila Rege (1998) contextualises Butler's thesis, illustrating how caste-patriarchy regulates female bodies via moral surveillance. In these stories,



the women's changes make that surveillance real; the body itself becomes the place where social norms are written. Nivedita Menon (2012) expands the framework by highlighting negotiation and fluidity: the heroines' evolving forms represent an Indian concept of becoming rather than a static identity.

Structuralist Folklore

Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968) delineates recurring functions that produce narrative coherence. In the Magahi corpus, the interdiction ("do not reveal," "do not speak"), the violation (speech or exposure), the punishment (exile or transformation), and the return (recognition and marriage) adhere to Propp's sequence. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) views myths as mediating oppositions; transformation reconciles conflicts between nature (bird, fruit) and culture (court, marriage). The Magahi stories show how this can happen with the help of God.

Ecofeminism and Indian Aesthetics

Carolyn Merchant (1980) criticises Western mechanistic worldviews that treat nature as an object; Vandana Shiva (1988) asserts the interconnectedness of women and nature as *Prakriti*—the creative force that sustains life. In the Magahi stories, the female main characters represent this regenerative power because their changes bring back balance to the environment and morals. Kapila Vatsyayan (1997) contextualises transformation within Indian aesthetic philosophy as expressions of *Shakti*, the cosmic energy that underpins creation, preservation, and dissolution. Divine figures, particularly Parvati and Shiva, function as narrative agents that re-sanctify the feminine, reinforcing moral order through compassionate restoration.

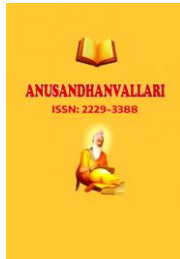
Plot Summaries of the Selected Tales

The King's Daughter Dove

In this Magahi folk tale, a childless king and queen seek divine intervention from a hermit, who blesses them with a promise of birth (Verma, 2008). The queen later gives birth to a dove instead of a human child, which shocks the court. The dove is kept out of sight of the public to hide this strange thing. But at night, the bird turns into a pretty girl and turns back into a bird at dawn. When the jealous co-wife or maid finds out about this secret, she tells everyone, which leads to the girl being kicked out. The dove-girl lives by getting help from holy people and ascetics as she walks through the woods. In the end, Lord Shiva shows up and blesses her change into a permanent human princess, giving her back her dignity and bringing her back together with her family. The transformation means moral cleansing and divine approval of feminine virtue, which is a common theme in Magahi oral tradition.

The Seven Swans

This story is about the relationship between a sister and her seven brothers. The brothers are turned into swans because their mother unfairly suspects them or because a witch casts a spell on them (Verma, 2008). The sister is determined to save them, so she goes on an ascetic journey, keeping a vow of silence and weaving shirts from nettles in the forest as a sign of devotion and strength. She doesn't say anything until the vow is over because her in-laws wrongly accuse her of witchcraft and punish her. When the final garment is placed on the youngest swan, the brothers regain human form, and her innocence is revealed. This Magahi version, which is similar to Indo-European versions, links silence to spiritual strength and moral strength. Transformation thus emerges as both a familial moral trial and a sisterly ethical rebirth, resonating with Butler's (1990) concept of performativity through repetitive ritualistic action.



Princess Belmanti

A queen who can't have children finds a miraculous fruit that promises to make her fertile in Princess Belmanti (Verma, 2008). After eating it, she gives birth to Belmanti, a beautiful child whose natural origins raise questions about her legitimacy. As Belmanti grows up, her beauty makes people jealous and makes them lie about her, which gets her kicked out of the country. A divine encounter, often through Parvati or a sage, shows that her birth was a gift from God. Belmanti gets her royal identity back by going through tests of chastity and perseverance. The fruit motif here, like in many farming myths, stands for fertility and rebirth. The change from fruit to human and from exile to recognition is a symbol of the natural cycle of decay and renewal that is at the heart of Magahi cosmology (Vatsyayan, 1997).

Analysis

1. Transformation and the Undoing of Gender Binaries

The transformation in these Magahi tales undermines gender as a static biological construct, exemplifying Butler's (1990) concept that identity is a performative act, perpetually formed through ritualised repetition. The dove-girl's shifting between bird and woman reflects how unstable social gender roles are. Her transformation is not just magical; it shows how identity changes when it is watched by men. The king's secrecy and society's shame over a "bird-daughter" show how women's bodies are sources of anxiety, both wanted and unwanted.

Rege (1998) extends this analysis to the caste-patriarchal framework, contending that Indian gender performance is regulated by purity laws and ritual constraints. In *The King's Daughter Dove*, hiding and revealing things are the limits of what is socially acceptable. Her change is both a punishment and a way to be reborn morally. Menon (2012) stresses that gender in Indian society is based on negotiation; the dove-girl has to negotiate her existence between divine legitimacy and being left out of society.

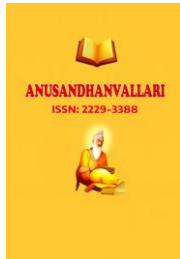
In *The Seven Swans*, the sister's silence represents a gendered performance of renunciation. Butler's (1990) concept of "iterability" is exemplified through the repetitive weaving, with each shirt representing a tangible act of care. Her silence, instead of being absent, becomes resistance; it changes forced passivity into moral agency. The story shows how women's strength can turn oppression into moral power. This is also shown in ecofeminist readings of self-renewal through suffering (Shiva, 1988).

2. Moral Testing on the Female Body

Propp's (1968) morphology elucidates the structural logic: interdiction (do not reveal or speak), violation (speech or exposure), punishment (exile or transformation), and return (recognition). The body is the centre of moral trial in each female protagonist's journey. The dove's captivity, the sister's muteness, and Belmanti's banishment exemplify the paradox of purity and contamination—where societal morality is evaluated through physical affliction.

Lévi-Strauss (1963) sees mythic transformation as a way to bring together two things that are opposite: nature and culture, or wild and domestic. The bird, swan, and fruit designs stand for "nature," while the court, marriage, and speech designs stand for "culture." Transformation harmonises these dichotomies through divine grace. Merchant (1980) criticises patriarchal cosmologies that separate nature from morality; in these narratives, however, the feminine-natural connection is reinstated as sacred. Belmanti's fruit-origin symbolizes fertility aligned with cosmic order rather than disorder.

Vandana Shiva's (1988) ecofeminist framework enhances this interpretation: the connection between women and nature is regenerative rather than subordinate. Each heroine embodies Prakriti, which is creative



energy that balances destruction and renewal. This restores moral ecology. Thus, bodily transformation becomes an ethical ecology, where rebirth restores cosmic harmony.

3. Divine Intervention and the Sacred Feminine

In every tale, change ends with divine recognition. The dove-girl can only change back into a girl after Shiva blesses her; the sister's vow is made holy when divine fire burns her nettle shirts; and Belmanti's exile ends when Parvati confirms her holy birth. Vatsyayan (1997) interprets such moments through the lens of Shakti, where female energy catalyses creation and resolution. The Parvati–Shiva dyad represents the synthesis of dynamic and reflective energies—*sṛṣṭi* (creation) and *sṭhiti* (preservation).

These divine interventions confirm the sacredness of feminine virtue as cosmically restorative. The heroines' changes are like the cycles of ritual purity in Hinduism: after being defiled (cursed or exiled), they must do penance (silence, endurance) and then be purified (recognition). The body thus reflects the cadence of *ṛta*, the universal ethical framework. Shiva's function as a validator recontextualises male divinity from a patriarchal authority to a cosmic observer of feminine energy.

Ecofeminist interpretations (Merchant, 1980; Shiva, 1988) view this reconciliation as ecological regeneration—the equilibrium between human and non-human domains. When the dove turns into a person, when swans become people again, or when fruit gives birth to a child, nature and morality come together, showing that balance has been restored.

4. Structural Motifs: Bird, Tree, Fruit, and Garment

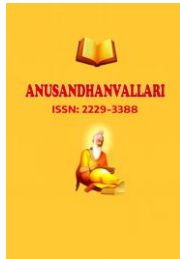
Motifs serve as semiotic connections between narrative and cosmology. The bird motif (dove or swan) represents impermanence and spiritual elevation. Lévi-Strauss (1963) sees birds in myth as links between the sky and the earth, or in this case, between the divine and the mortal. In Magahi culture, birds are often seen as souls or omens, so turning them into people is a sign of resurrection.

The fruit motif in Princess Belmanti corresponds with agricultural fertility rites. According to Vatsyayan (1997), Indian aesthetics view fruit and seed as symbols of potential; the womb is a reflection of the earth's fertility. Belmanti's birth from fruit makes this connection real by turning natural fertility into sacred motherhood.

The nettle shirts in *The Seven Swans* are an example of a garment motif that shows how work can change things. Propp's (1968) "magical agent" function is embodied in these textiles: threads of suffering woven into salvation. Silence serves as narrative suspension; upon the resumption of speech, identity is re-established. These motifs together show cyclical regeneration: hiding (seed/egg), changing (growth/maturation), and revealing (flowering/birth). The repetitive images support the Magahi view that there is a link between the natural and moral worlds.

5. Caste, Kinship, and Recognition

In these stories, recognition is not just emotional; it is also ritual-juridical, which means that it is based on social norms of caste and kinship. Rege (1998) elucidates that Indian patriarchy conflates caste purity with female chastity; consequently, public acknowledgement of the transformed woman reinstates both moral and social order. The dove-girl's acceptance restores royal lineage; the sister's vindication restores family honour; and Belmanti's marriage restores dynastic continuity.



Menon (2012) reinterprets this as negotiation: the women reintegrate into normative frameworks under revised moral conditions. Their suffering legitimises social exclusion. Through divine arbitration, transformation reintegrates women into the community without nullifying their moral agency.

This dual movement—subordination and subversion—epitomises what is referred to as the “negotiated masculinity” of Magahi folklore: male redemption is contingent upon female endurance. In *The Seven Swans*, the brothers and in *Daughter Dove*, the princes get their power back through women's moral work, which turns the heroic hierarchy on its head.

6. Ecofeminist Regeneration and Prakriti

The main idea of ecofeminism is that nature and women have cyclical vitality, which is shown in these stories. Merchant (1980) criticises the Western idea that spirit is more important than matter; on the other hand, Magahi stories make matter itself holy. The fruit-born Belmanti, the sister who lives in the forest, and the bird-girl all show that the natural world is sacred.

Shiva (1988) contends that Prakriti, the feminine principle, is not passive but rather generative. The heroines' changes bring back ecological balance that people have upset by being arrogant, like kings trying to control birth or societies punishing those who don't fit in. Their transformations embody an environmental ethic that seeks redemption through a return to the rhythm of nature.

Vatsyayan's (1997) triadic model—creation, preservation, dissolution—illustrates the pattern: the curse (dissolution), endurance (preservation), and blessing (creation) reflect cosmic cycles. So, bodily transformation works as a dharmic ecology, which reinforces the Magahi people's understanding of how everything is connected.

7. Comparative Resonances

In comparison, *The Seven Swans* is similar to the European *Six Swans* (Grimm) and *The Wild Swans* (Andersen), but the Magahi version includes ascetic work and divine mediation instead of just magic (Tatar, 2012). In the same way, *The King's Daughter Dove* has themes in common with the Indian Jataka story of the “Swan Maiden,” where change means that karma continues (Cowell, 1895). The Magahi versions, on the other hand, put more emphasis on moral testing for women than on romantic union. This fits with the region's focus on *strīdharmā* (women's moral duty).

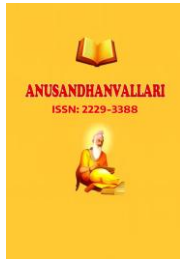
These cross-cultural comparisons show that transformation themes are universal, while also showing that regional ethics of endurance, sacrifice, and divine justice are important. They support Lévi-Strauss's (1963) argument that myths from different cultures use symbolic transformation to solve similar problems, like the one between body and soul or desire and duty.

Findings

The examination of *The King's Daughter Dove*, *The Seven Swans*, and *Princess Belmanti* demonstrates that transformation in Magahi folk narratives serves as both a narrative device and a cultural metaphor for expressing moral order, gender identity, and divine justice. This interdisciplinary reading yields three principal findings.

1. Transformation as a Moral and Social Rebirth:

In all three narratives, changing one's body is a metaphor for moral and social order purification and reintegration. The dove-girl's transformation from avian to human reinstates royal lineage and reinforces the sanctity of virtuous femininity. The sister's endurance and silence in *The Seven Swans* demonstrate that suffering, when aligned with faith and duty, leads to moral ascendance. In *Princess Belmanti*, nature's fertility—embodied in the fruit that yields



the princess—redefines purity beyond social suspicion, presenting birth and womanhood as inherently sacred. These changes are not just physical; they are also ontological. They show the removal of moral pollution and the reestablishment of divine justice (Butler, 1990; Verma, 2008).

2. The Female Body as a Site of Negotiation:

The bodies of the female protagonists serve as liminal spaces where societal norms and cosmic forces converge. Their bodily changes show the effects of patriarchal control—hiding, silence, and exile—but their ability to endure these changes gives them spiritual strength (Rege, 1998; Menon, 2012). Butler's (1990) performativity framework elucidates how these women enact gender through ritualistic practices: weaving shirts, maintaining silence, and upholding familial honour. In each narrative, the woman's agency arises not from defiance but from disciplined moral conduct, illustrating an indigenous form of empowerment rooted in patience and ethical labour rather than explicit rebellion.

3. Divine Validation and Ecological Harmony:

Divine intervention, frequently manifested through Parvati and Shiva, serves as a restorative force that sanctifies transformation. The re-humanisation of the protagonists is consistently accompanied by divine recognition, indicating that morality, gender, and ecology are intricately interconnected within the Magahi cosmological framework. Vandana Shiva's (1988) concept of Prakriti and Vatsyayan's (1997) notion of Shakti elucidate how the feminine principle reinstates equilibrium between nature and society. So, change is in line with ecological regeneration: the bird comes back to earth, the fruit gives life, and the swans become human again, showing how creation and renewal are always happening together.

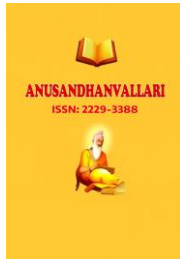
These findings collectively demonstrate that Magahi folk narratives depict transformation as an ethical ecology, wherein gendered virtue, divine justice, and natural order intersect. The stories express a uniquely Indian perspective on identity and transformation, one that transmutes suffering into sacred renewal and re-establishes equilibrium among the human, moral, and cosmic domains.

Conclusion

The three Magahi folk tales examined—The King's Daughter Dove, The Seven Swans, and Princess Belmanti—illustrate that transformation in folklore is not arbitrary; it reflects cultural negotiations of gender, morality, and divinity. According to Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, the heroines' transformations show that identity is something that is acted out and can change. Propp (1968) and Lévi-Strauss (1963) elucidate their narrative structure as a resolution of opposites, whereas ecofeminist interpretations (Shiva, 1988; Merchant, 1980) perceive their transformations as regenerative rather than punitive. Indian intellectuals like Rege (1998), Menon (2012), and Vatsyayan (1997) reframe these dynamics within the frameworks of caste, patriarchy, and aesthetics, illustrating how transformation operates as a dharmic equilibrium.

In the end, the female body becomes the holy place of change, a space where human virtue, cosmic order, and ecological balance meet. Divine figures such as Parvati and Shiva serve as intermediaries between societal norms and transcendence, validating the sanctity of feminine power. In Magahi folklore, bodily transformation is a theology of renewal that honours the fluidity of life and gender as ongoing acts of creation.

By connecting structuralism, feminism, and Indian metaphysics, this paper puts Magahi folk stories in the context of global folklore, showing how much theoretical potential they have. These narratives convey that transformation—be it physical, moral, or spiritual—is not a decline but a journey towards completeness, resonating with Vatsyayan's (1997) conception of Shakti: "That which transforms is that which sustains."



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