

The Virtues of A·chik Women as Reflected in Garo Proverbs

Ms. Nambabalche S. Sangma

Research Scholar (PhD)

Dept. of Garo NEHU Tura Campus, Meghalaya

Abstract

Garo proverbs constitute an important form of traditional A·chik verbal expression through which social values, practical knowledge, moral instruction, and cultural expectations are communicated. Among the various subjects represented in these proverbial expressions, the qualities associated with women provide an important area for literary study. This paper examines the virtues of A·chik women as represented in selected Garo proverbs and supported by examples from Garo poems, dramas, and narratives. The study focuses on diligence and industriousness, beauty, beautiful voice, patience and endurance, and obedience and respect for elders. The analysis demonstrates that Garo proverbs do not merely describe women's everyday experiences but also communicate traditional expectations concerning desirable qualities associated with A·chik womanhood. Selected literary works such as Chigitchakgre Nokma, Kring, Sonajing, Dikki, Dome Rani, Maljengni Songrea, and Saljong Tasin' Me·chik provide further literary representations of these qualities. The paper argues that the representation of A·chik women in Garo proverbial and literary expressions is multifaceted, encompassing their labour, physical appearance, voice, patience, endurance, and relationships with elders.

Keywords: A·chik women, Garo proverbs, virtues, representation, Garo literature, traditional expressions

1. Introduction

The Garo, or A·chik, people are an indigenous community primarily inhabiting Meghalaya, Assam, Nagaland, and other parts of India. Their cultural knowledge and social values have been transmitted through various forms of traditional expression. Among these, proverbs occupy an important place because they communicate ideas about social behaviour, morality, relationships, and everyday life in concise forms. Garo proverbs are used in different social contexts, including giving advice, teaching children, settling disagreements, reconciling couples, and communicating during clan meetings and other social gatherings.

Roger D. Abrahams, in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, discusses proverbs under the category of “proverbs and proverbial expressions.” He observes that “proverbs are short and witty traditional expressions that arise as part of every discourse and that they are generally expressed in the form of a single sentence” (119). He further identifies proverbs as among the shortest forms of traditional expression. In the A·chik context, proverbs similarly function as concise expressions through which experience, social knowledge, advice, and values are communicated.

Winish K. Sangma, in A·chik Kattarang, also observes the use of meaningful and appropriate traditional expressions in A·chik social communication. He states, “A·chik ma·gitcham pagitchamrang, mela saldongarango golpo ka·arango ning·tugipa su·ugipa aro kragipa kattarangko jakkalronga...” The Ancient A·chik people used profound, rich and expressive language in their conversation and meeting. This observation demonstrates the importance of meaningful traditional expressions in A·chik social life. Garo proverbs therefore function not only as concise forms of communication but also as expressions through which social ideals and values are represented.

Women occupy an important place in these representations. Garo proverbs contain expressions concerning women's work, appearance, relationships, conduct, and responsibilities. These representations provide an important area of literary study because they reveal how traditional expressions construct and communicate desirable qualities associated with A·chik women. Although A·chik oral traditions and proverbial expressions have been documented in various works, the specific representation of women's virtues through Garo proverbs has received limited focused attention.

This paper therefore examines how Garo proverbs represent the virtues associated with A·chik women. The discussion is supported by selected Garo poems, dramas, and narratives in which similar qualities are represented through female characters and situations. The study focuses particularly on diligence and industriousness, beauty, beautiful voice, patience and endurance, and obedience and respect for elders.

2. Diligence and Industriousness

Diligence and industriousness are among the important qualities represented in Garo proverbs concerning women. One such proverb states:

“Am·bol ja·bak gate,/Merong rongdik done.” (Aganme·apa 2)

Here, am·bol refers to firewood, while ja·bak gate refers to filling or stocking the place where firewood is kept with firewood. Merong means rice, rongdik refers to a traditional container made of clay or mud, and done means to keep or store something inside. The proverb connects the collection and storage of essential household resources with women's labour and preparedness.

The representation of women's industriousness is also found in Icylian R. Marak's Chigitchakgre Nokma. The female protagonist goes to the jum, or shifting-cultivation field, carrying a kokcheng, a traditional basket, to collect firewood. Her participation in this work represents the active involvement of women in activities necessary for household sustenance.

A similar representation occurs in Kroshnil D. Sangma's drama Kring. Several women from the same village go to the riverside of the Simsang River to collect banana leaves for wrapping rice. After returning home, one of the women, Mire, pound the rice. The scene represents the collective participation of women in activities connected with food preparation and household sustenance.

These literary representations correspond with the traditional labour represented in the proverb. Activities such as collecting firewood, gathering banana leaves, pounding rice, and storing rice demonstrate the importance of women's contribution to household life. The proverb and the literary works therefore

construct an image of A·chik women as diligent, industrious, and responsible in matters related to family sustenance and everyday work.

Beauty

Garo traditional literary expressions also represent physical beauty as a desirable quality associated with women. In Sonajing, Sonajing's beauty is described through the following expression:

“Do·do do·rimit gita,/Wagam kitma bitchiri,/Okgil te·mina gita.” (Sonajing 3–4)

Here, do·do do·rimit refers to a yellowish bird; wagam means tooth; kitma bitchiri refers to a wild fruit; okgil means the skin of the belly; and te·mina refers to a ripe melon. The description presents Sonajing's physical appearance as beautiful and desirable.

A similar representation occurs in Llewelyn R. Marak's traditional drama Dikki, where the beauty of the two sisters, Giting and Toso, is described:

“Okgil te·mina gita /Ku·chil naranggil gita, /Wagam kitma bitchiri /Ku·ba e·ching bisoksi.” (Dikki- I,53)
Here, ku·chil means lip, naranggil refers to the skin of an orange, wagam means tooth, and ku·ba e·ching bisoksi refers to the mouth and ginger. The description presents different aspects of the women's physical appearance as attractive.

Awensing Rongmuthu's narrative Dome Rani also contains a description of Dombé's beauty:

“Kni rasin jaksila,/ ku·chil mandal bibalan bibal, /wagam kitma bitchilan bitchil.” (Dome Rani 7)

In this description, kni means hair, rasin refers to onion, jaksila refers to the beauty of the onion leaf, ku·chil means lip, mandal bibal refers to the Erythrina flower, and wagam kitma bitchil refers to the teeth and a wild fruit.

These examples from Sonajing, Dikki, and Dome Rani demonstrate that beauty occupies a significant place in the literary representation of A·chik women. The descriptions focus on different aspects of physical appearance, including the skin, teeth, lips, and hair. Such representations present physical beauty as one of the desirable qualities associated with women in traditional A·chik literary expression.

These descriptions should not, however, be understood as a statement about the appearance of A·chik women generally. Rather, they represent an idealized literary image of feminine beauty within particular traditional narratives and poetic expressions.

Beautiful Voice

The representation of feminine beauty in Garo literary expression is not limited to physical appearance. The quality of a woman's voice is also represented as desirable. In Sonajing, the beauty of a woman's voice is expressed:

“Ku·rang gaanti gita / Ka·sirokrok rinokbal.” (Sonajing 4)

Here, ku·rang means “voice.” Gaanti refers to a very small insect whose sound is high-pitched and which is difficult to see because of its small size. Ka·sirokrok rinokbal refers to something soft and smooth. The expression therefore describes the woman's voice as high-pitched, soft, smooth, and pleasant.

This representation adds another dimension to the portrayal of A·chik women. Feminine attractiveness is represented not only through physical appearance but also through the quality of the voice. The proverb or literary expression thus associates a pleasant voice with desirable feminine qualities.

3. Patience and Endurance

Patience and endurance form another important group of qualities represented in Garo proverbial expressions concerning women. Monensing R. Sangma uses the proverb:

“Nio Cha·che Chakna Sari

kimka dingna.” (Chasong Gital A·chik Poedorang 69)

Here, nio means mother-in-law, cha·che means chaff, and chakna means obey. Sari means sister-in-law, kimka means eggplant, and dingna means fight.

The proverb is traditionally used when a woman is about to go to her future husband's household for cha·senga, a customary temporary stay before marriage. It should not be understood as a statement that every woman will necessarily experience conflict with her future mother-in-law or sister-in-law. Rather, the proverb functions as traditional instruction, teaching a woman to have patience and endure possible difficulties during this period.

The reference to the mother-in-law and sister-in-law acknowledges the possibility of unpleasant words or disagreements. The woman is traditionally advised to remain patient even when the words or behaviour of her future mother-in-law may be difficult to bear. The proverb therefore represents patience and endurance as desirable qualities for a woman entering this temporary household situation.

A similar expression occurs in Kroshnil D. Sangma's Kring:

“Nio sari a·kim gana, Cha·che chakna nanga.” (Kring, 54)

The proverb is associated with the practice of cha·senga in the drama. Jimje goes to cha·senga for Jalasing. Although her future husband does not initially agree to marry her, Jimje remains patient and does not return to her own household without achieving her purpose. Her experience provides a literary representation of patience and determination in the face of difficulty.

The traditional practice is also discussed in Maljengni Songrea. The work describes Nomindik staying in Maljeng's household as part of the practice known as cha·senga. The same proverb concerning the mother-in-law and sister-in-law is also mentioned in the work. Its appearance in another literary source demonstrates the continuing presence of the proverbial expression in representations of this traditional practice.

A different and more intense representation of endurance appears in Monensing R. Sangma's poem Saljong Tasin' Me·chik. In the poem, a woman goes underground for cha·senga as an act of sacrifice for her husband. According to the poem, she cannot return from the underground. Her experience represents an extreme form of endurance and sacrifice.

These literary examples demonstrate that the proverb functions as more than a description of an actual event. It serves as traditional advice to women before entering their future husband's household for

cha·senga. The examples in Kring, Maljengni Songrea, and Saljong Tasin' Me·chik further represent patience, endurance, determination, and sacrifice in relation to women and marriage.

4. Obedience and Respect for Elders

Obedience and respect for elders are also represented as desirable qualities associated with A·chik women. The proverb:

“Am·pokma ja·groo asonge, Pakma do·deo dengdale.” (Aganme·apa 8)

refers to the honouring of the elder maternal uncle. The expression highlights the respect accorded to the maternal uncle and represents obedience towards an elder as an important social quality.

A similar representation can be found in Bluwin's Maljengni Songrea. When Nomindik's maternal uncle takes part in the matter concerning her marriage Nomindik responds with obedience and submission. Nomindik's response demonstrates her respect for her maternal uncle and her willingness to listen to him in a matter concerning her life. (Maljengni Songrea,12)

The proverb and the literary narrative therefore represent obedience and respect within the relationship between an A·chik woman and her maternal uncle. In this context, obedience is not presented simply as an individual characteristic but as part of a traditional relationship with an elder. The representation highlights respect, willingness to listen, and submission to the guidance of an elder as desirable qualities associated with women.

The selected Garo proverbs and literary works present a multifaceted representation of A·chik women. The qualities represented in these texts extend beyond a single understanding of feminine virtue. Diligence and industriousness are associated with women's participation in activities connected with household sustenance. Beauty is represented through descriptions of physical appearance, while the quality of the voice provides another dimension of feminine attractiveness. Patience and endurance are represented through traditional advice concerning cha·senga and through literary narratives involving difficult interpersonal circumstances. Obedience and respect are represented through the relationship between women and elders, particularly the maternal uncle.

The recurrence of similar proverbial expressions in different literary works is particularly significant. The proverb concerning the mother-in-law and sister-in-law appears in more than one literary context and is connected with the traditional practice of cha·senga. Its function is not simply to predict what will happen to a woman but to provide traditional instruction concerning how she should conduct herself when entering a new household environment before marriage.

Similarly, the proverb concerning the maternal uncle represents a particular form of social relationship in which respect and obedience are valued. Literary narratives such as Maljengni Songrea provide further representations of these values through female characters.

Taken together, these examples suggest that Garo proverbs participate in the construction of an idealized representation of A·chik womanhood. The woman represented in these expressions is industrious in her work, attractive in appearance and voice, patient in difficult circumstances, and respectful towards elders.

These representations should not be taken as descriptions of every A·chik woman. Rather, they reflect traditional ideals, expectations, and values expressed through particular literary and proverbial contexts. The supporting poems, dramas, and narratives are important because they demonstrate that the qualities represented in proverbs also appear in wider A·chik literary expression. The connection between proverbs and literary works therefore allows the representation of women's virtues to be examined not as isolated proverbial statements but as part of a broader literary tradition.

5. Conclusion

Garo proverbs provide a significant body of traditional literary expression through which qualities associated with A·chik women are represented and communicated. The selected examples demonstrate representations of diligence and industriousness, beauty, beautiful voice, patience and endurance, and obedience and respect for elders.

The proverb “Am·bol ja·bak gate, Merong rongdik done” represents women's diligence and responsibility in relation to household sustenance, while Chigitchakgre Nokma and Kring provide related representations of women's labour. The descriptions in Sonajing, Dikki, and Dome Rani present physical beauty as a desirable quality, while Sonajing additionally represents a pleasant and beautiful voice. The proverb “Nio cha·che chakna, Sari kimka dingna” functions as traditional instruction concerning patience during cha·senga, and its significance is reinforced by representations in Kring, Maljengni Songrea, and Saljong Tasin’ Me·chik. Finally, “Am·pokma ja·groo asonge, Pakma do·deo dengdale” represents respect and obedience towards the elder maternal uncle, a quality also reflected in Maljengni Songrea.

These examples show that Garo proverbs do more than communicate brief pieces of practical wisdom. They participate in representing desirable qualities associated with A·chik women and preserving traditional ideas concerning women's conduct, labour, relationships, and social responsibilities. At the same time, these representations should be understood as culturally and textually situated ideals rather than universal descriptions of A·chik women. The study therefore contributes to the literary study of Garo proverbs by examining how traditional proverbial expressions and related literary works construct and preserve representations of A·chik womanhood.

Works Cited

1. Dorson, Richard M. *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. The University of Chicago All Rights Reserved, 1972.
2. Bangshall, B. S. *Sonajing (Ka·saan’ Git)*. Sunilla G. Momin, 2010.
3. Marak, Julius L. R., And Milton S. Sangma. *Aganme·apa*. D.J. Publication, 2014.
4. Marak, Icylian R. *Chigitchakgreni Nokma*. Tura Book Room, 2009.
5. Marak, Llewellyn R. *Dikki I*. D.J Publication, 2008.
6. Rongmuthu, Awensing S. *Dombe Rani*. Almega Publication, 2012.
7. • Sangma, Monensing R. “Saljong Tasin’ Me·chik.” *Chasong Gital A·chik Poedorang*. Keneth M. Momin, Compiler, Tura Book Room, Year Not Mention.
8. Sangma, Bluwin Ch. *Maljengni Songrea*. D.J. Publication, 2011.
9. Sangma, Winnish K. *A·Chik Kattarang*. Author, 12th Ed, 2022.
10. Sangma, Kroshnil D. *Kring (A·chikni Ja·rikbewal)*. Author, 2010.