
Demonisation of the Feminine: Rakshasis and She-Devils in South Asian Folklore

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Abstract: This research essay examines the demonisation of the feminine in South Asian folklore through the figures of Rakshasis and She-Devils, with a specific focus on Bengali, Deccan, and South Indian traditions. By conducting a comparative case study, the essay elucidates how these female supernatural beings symbolise cultural anxieties surrounding women's power, sexuality, and rebellion. The study situates these folklore narratives within broader feminist theoretical frameworks and anthropological inquiries that challenge patriarchal constructions of gender. Through analysis of texts such as the Manasa Mangal Kavya and folk compilations like Thakurmar Jhuli, as well as comparative accounts from Deccan and South India, the essay argues that the demonisation of female supernatural figures reflects a deep-seated societal ambivalence towards female agency. This work contributes to ongoing interdisciplinary discussions on gender, power, and myth in South Asian cultural studies.

Keywords: Feminine demonisation, South Asian folklore, cultural anxieties, gender dynamics, feminist theory

Introduction

South Asian folklore is imbued with narratives that both celebrate and demonise the feminine. In texts from medieval to early modern periods, the representation of female supernatural beings, such as Rakshasis and She-Devils, serves as a critical lens through which cultural anxieties regarding women's power and autonomy are negotiated. The purpose of this research essay is to undertake a comparative study of female demons across Bengali, Deccan, and South Indian folkloristics and to evaluate how these figures symbolise societal fears of female agency, sexuality, and rebellion. Drawing upon established literature within feminist theory and cultural anthropology, this essay argues that the portrayal of female demons not only reflects but actively reinforces patriarchal norms by constructing the feminine as both alluring and dangerous.

This study is structured to begin with a review of existing literature on the demonisation of the feminine, followed by a detailed comparative case study of supernatural

figures from three distinct geographical regions. The subsequent analysis and discussion contextualise these findings within intersecting discourses on gender and power dynamics. Ultimately, the essay concludes by reflecting on the implications of these cultural narratives for our contemporary understanding of gender in South Asia.

II. Literature Review

The literature on the demonisation of the feminine in South Asian folklore reveals a multifaceted tradition in which female supernatural beings are imbued with qualities that both attract and repel societal attention. This duality is central to understanding how the feminine is simultaneously celebrated and condemned.

In Bengali mythology, Rakshasis or Rakkhoshis are prominent figures whose transformative powers allow them to assume human forms to infiltrate social orders. The *Manasa Mangal Kavya*, for instance, narrates the tale of Manasa, a serpent goddess whose divine attributes are contested by patriarchal norms that deny her rightful space within the religious and social spheres (Chakravarty). Similarly, collections like *Thakurmar Jhuli* feature characters such as Rakkhoshi Rani, the demonic queen who represents a monstrous embodiment of female ambition and power. These texts offer insights into a cultural system that both venerates and vilifies the assertive, autonomous woman.

In the Deccan region, the folklore surrounding figures such as the Churel—a spirit often depicted with backward-facing feet—further exemplifies societal fears regarding female sexuality and independence. The Churel is portrayed as a vengeful entity whose actions serve to caution against the perceived dangers of unbridled female autonomy. The depiction of such beings speaks to broader cultural anxieties about the subversion of traditional gender roles.

A comparative look at South Indian folklore reveals the Yakshini, a class of female nature spirits that, in some traditions, are revered as tutelary deities while in others are feared as malevolent beings capable of cursing humans and draining men of their vitality. This dual portrayal highlights the nuanced, ambivalent attitudes toward female power that pervade South Asian mythologies.

In addition to folkloric narratives, feminist scholarship has critically engaged with these myths to reveal the underlying power dynamics that inform gender constructions. This analysis emphasises how the demonisation of women as witches or keepers of demons functions as a regulatory mechanism, reinforcing patriarchal dominance by casting deviations from normative femininity as dangerous and subversive. This body of work underscores the potent symbolic role played by female supernatural figures in articulating and perpetuating traditional apprehensions about women's independence.

III. Comparative Case Study: Female Demons Across Regions

A. Bengali Folklore

In Bengali tradition, the figure of the Rakkhoshi is a powerful mythological symbol that encapsulates the tension between divine feminine power and societal rejection. Central to this tradition is the narrative of Manasa in Ketakadas Kshemananda's *Manasa Mangal*

Kavya, where the serpent goddess's struggle for recognition reflects the resistance of patriarchal structures to female divinity. Despite her supernatural powers and divine lineage, Manasa is repeatedly denied worship and legitimacy, especially by the male protagonist Chand Saudagar. Her portrayal oscillates between vengeful and redemptive, as she devastates Chand Sadagar's family until he finally concedes worship. On one hand, her abilities position her as a force of nature capable of both creation and destruction; on the other hand, her failure to gain societal acceptance underscores the broader tension between reverence for female power and its simultaneous demonisation. Her journey from rejection to acceptance symbolises a broader struggle against institutionalised resistance to autonomous feminine power.

The Rakkhoshi Rani, as depicted in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's collection *Thakurmar Jhuli*, is portrayed not merely as a supernatural being but also as a symbol of female ambition and defiance. She is a formidable shape-shifter who infiltrates human society, particularly through marriage, thereby disrupting established patriarchal structures (Patra 23). The narrative of the Rakkhoshi Rani dramatises the threat of female autonomy, as her ultimate destruction by male protagonists serves as a cautionary tale warning against the dangers inherent in women's emancipation.

B. Deccan Folklore

In the folklore of the Deccan region, the figure of the Churel emerges as a potent symbol of female transgression. Characterised by her distinctive physical trait of backward-facing feet and no mouth, the Churel is a spectral figure whose vengefulness is directed toward men (Guiley 95). Typically haunting desolate or polluted spaces, she is believed to lure young men by assuming the form of a beautiful woman, only to drain their vitality or life-force, leaving them aged and weakened. Her duality—grotesque in essence yet seductive in disguise—reflects societal fears regarding uncontrolled female sexuality and the subversion of established gender norms. As a figure who operates outside the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, the Churel serves as a cautionary tale that simultaneously fascinates and terrifies the collective imagination.

The Deccan narratives emphasise the disruptive potential of female power: even in her spectral form, the Churel is portrayed as an ungovernable force capable of tipping the balance of social order. Her existence in folklore is thus a manifestation of deep-seated cultural panics about the consequences of defying gendered expectations.

C. South Indian Folklore

In South Indian folklore, Yakshinis occupy a space that is both revered and feared, thereby adding layers of complexity to the discourse on feminine power. Their association with nature, fertility, and the dual capacities for creation and destruction marks a departure from the more straightforwardly malevolent representations of the Rakshasi or the Churel. The ambiguity of Yakshinis reflects regional differences in cultural narratives; especially in Kerala's vernacular traditions, Yakshinis are portrayed as captivating women who lure unsuspecting travelers only to reveal their true form as predatory beings that consume or drain their victims, leaving behind only fragments like hair or nails. This dual nature supports

the argument that, while female power is celebrated in certain aspects—such as its life-giving role—its latent potential to disrupt prevailing social norms renders it a source of cultural ambivalence. South Indian folklore encapsulates the unpredictable and multifaceted aspects of femininity in a cultural context that acknowledges both the positive and negative dimensions of female agency.

IV. Analysis and Discussion

The comparative exploration of female demonology across Bengali, Deccan, and South Indian folklore reveals significant insights into the cultural construction of gender and power in South Asia. The consistent emergence of female supernatural beings as figures of both reverence and dread highlights a recurring pattern: the demonisation of the feminine is deeply intertwined with societal efforts to regulate and control female agency.

In Bengali folklore, the narrative of Manasa—as recounted in the *Manasa Mangal Kavya*—illustrates how divine feminine power is systematically undermined by patriarchal forces. Despite possessing inherent divinity, Manasa's struggle for acceptance underscores the refusal of traditional structures to acknowledge female autonomy. This narrative is paralleled by the figure of Rakkhoshi Rani in *Thakurmar Jhuli*, who serves as a symbol of unchecked female ambition. Her narrative, rooted in a culture that highly values social order and marital propriety, casts her as an anomaly—a disruptive force that eventually meets her downfall at the hands of a male hero. This narrative structure reinforces the notion that female power, when exercised beyond prescribed boundaries, must be reined in. The Rakkhoshi narrative in Bengali culture illustrates a broader societal anxiety: the fear that a woman who steps beyond conventional roles will destabilise the established order.

The Churel in Deccan folklore embodies similar anxieties but does so through a spectral, almost ghost-like image. The Churel's backward-facing feet—a physical marker of otherness—serve as a metaphor for the inversion of normative gender and spatial arrangements. Her role as a vengeful spirit targeting men symbolically critiques the perceived dangers of female sexual liberation and challenges the stability of traditional family structures. The horror evoked by the Churel underscores the cultural imperative to monitor and restrict female autonomy.

South Indian texts further complicate the picture with the addition of nature-centric deities such as the Yakshini, whose dual identity embodies both fertility and potential retribution. The Yakshini's portrayal challenges the strictly punitive framework of female demonisation by suggesting that aspects of the feminine—particularly those related to nature and life—are inherently ambivalent. As seen in various oral traditions, the Yakshini operates as a counterpoint to the Rakshasi: while one side emphasises seduction and moral decay, the other highlights the cyclic, regenerative force of nature that can also transform into vengefulness when misappropriated. In vernacular folklore, particularly in Kerala narratives, Yakshinis or Yakshis are often described as ghostly or vampiric entities who lure men with beauty, only to drain their life-force or cause death. This duality is central to understanding the cultural significance of these figures: they are not merely monstrous in a superficial sense but are woven into the very fabric of societal unease concerning female power.

Feminist theorists have long argued that the labeling of women as demonic or otherworldly is a strategy for maintaining strict social hierarchies. The portrayal of women as witches or demons functions to reinforce patriarchal norms by relegating female agency to the realm of the dangerous and uncontrolled. This critical framework is vividly illustrated in the narratives of Rakshasis and She-Devils, where the demonisation of the feminine becomes a symbolic mechanism to regulate women's behaviour and signal the perils inherent in challenging gendered expectations.

Furthermore, the intersection of folklore with cultural and social anxieties reveals the role that myth plays in mediating conflicts surrounding power and sexuality. The supernatural powers attributed to figures such as Manasa and the Churel are not mere story elements; they are emblematic of a deeper societal ambivalence towards female empowerment. In a patriarchal context where control over female sexuality and ambition is paramount, these figures serve as both a warning and a reflection of the underlying tension between respect for feminine strength and the fear of its potential for rebellion.

Thus, the comparative case study not only highlights regional variations in the portrayal of female demons but also illustrates a shared cultural narrative. Across Bengali, Deccan, and South Indian traditions, female supernatural figures can be seen as embodiments of the societal impulse to define and confine female roles. Their dual capacities for creation and destruction, benevolence and malevolence, encapsulate the paradoxical perception of the feminine as a source of both empowerment and destabilisation.

This duality reinforces the thesis that Rakshasis and She-Devils are inherently ambivalent figures. On one level, they represent the dangerous potential of female power when liberated from societal constraints. On another level, their demonisation serves as a means to suppress and control any deviation from prescribed norms. The ideological tensions embodied by these figures mirror a deeper contestation over gender equality—centred on the legitimacy and distribution of power. As such, analyses rooted in feminist theory provide invaluable insights into how folklore not only mirrors but also enforces the limitations imposed on women.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, the demonisation of the feminine in South Asian folklore—exemplified by figures such as Rakshosis in Bengali texts, the Churel in Deccan legends, and the dualistic Yakshini in South Indian narratives—reveals persistent sociocultural apprehensions about female power, sexuality, and rebellion. These supernatural figures, with their contradictory traits and ambiguous roles, serve as potent symbols of the societal struggle to reconcile the potential for female empowerment with the desire to maintain patriarchal control.

The comparative analysis presented in this essay underscores that folklore is more than a collection of mythic narratives; it is a dynamic repository of cultural values, fears, and

aspirations. By mapping the trajectories of these female demons across different regions, this study has demonstrated how deeply ingrained cultural anxieties shape narratives around gender and power. Moreover, these findings highlight the critical insights that interdisciplinary approaches—drawing from both anthropology and feminist theory—offer in understanding the complex role of myth in delineating social boundaries.

Ultimately, the demonisation of the feminine in these traditions is not solely a reflection of historical prejudices but a living discourse that continues to influence contemporary debates about gender and authority in South Asia. Recognising and critically engaging with these narratives is essential for deconstructing patriarchal ideologies and fostering a more equitable understanding of feminine agency.

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