

**Fate of Feminine Identity: Beauty in Indian and Korean Narratives**

---

**Ms. Prapti Pattnaik<sup>1</sup>**

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, Rama Devi Women's University, Bhubaneswar,  
Odisha, India

**Dr. Manisha Mishra<sup>2</sup>**

Associate Professor, Department of English, Rama Devi Women's University,  
Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

---

**Article Received:** 05/01/2026

**Article Accepted:** 05/02/2026

**Published Online:** 06/02/2026

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.01.52

---

**Abstract:**

Beauty has been regarded as a crucial gauge to weigh people across cultures. It has always been more than mere aesthetics. It has been a site of power and identity, shaping women's worth and self-perception. Folklore, as a vessel of oral storytelling, has preserved narratives where beauty is presented both as reward and a burden, often dictated by supernatural forces, moral virtues and societal expectations. This research paper aims to compare the representation of beauty in select Indian and Korean folktales, highlighting how each culture interprets beauty and its reception on women through its traditional narratives. While beauty is often depicted through physical attributes, its significance extends beyond the outer appearance and reflects values such as morality, identity and virtue. Beauty has become a mark of acceptance, status and redemption, reinforcing the idea that a woman's worth is linked to her appearance. This comparative study aims to analyse a selection of folktales from both Indian and Korean traditions, to understand how beauty is often used as a tool to convey lessons, define character traits and uphold cultural norms.

**Keywords:** beauty, folktales, culture, identity, morality

**Introduction**

Beauty has long been a defining measure of women's worth in patriarchal societies, shaping their identities, status, opportunities and treatment. Rooted in mythology and folklore, beauty is often positioned as a tool of validation, where women are valued not for their abilities but for their adherence to idealized physical standards. The idealization of this physical appearance reduces women to objects of desire, overshadowing their talents, intellect and capabilities. In many patriarchal cultures, beauty dictates a woman's fate, often influencing marriage prospects and social mobility. Those who conform to these beauty standards are accepted, while those who deviate from it face rejection, oppression and even

---

violence. This obsession with beauty is not something introduced in the modern times but has been in existence since ancient times, deeply rooted in mythology, folklores and historical narratives. This paper aims to examine how Indian and Korean folktales reflect and reinforce these patriarchal ideals, exploring how deeply ingrained beauty standards continue to shape women's lives.

### **Portrayal of Beauty in India Folktales**

#### **The Bald Wife**

*The Bald Wife*, a Bengali Folktale, portrays how beauty has become a determinant of a woman's worth in a patriarchal society. The story follows the life of two wives married to the same person and how their beauty drives their fate. The elder wife is described to be having only one tuft of hair and unloved by her husband. On the other hand, the younger wife is her husband's favourite because she has two tufts of hair which is considered more beautiful. The younger wife abuses the elder wife all day which can be seen as the enforcement of societal beauty norms resulting in discrimination. The younger wife assumes dominance because of her appearance and uses it to oppress another woman. We can see how women who do not meet accepted beauty standards are not just ill-treated by men but also by other women. The elder wife was unloved by her husband and at the same time was also abused by the younger wife. She is further driven away from the house after the younger wife tears off even that one single tuft of hair. However, as the story advances the elder wife undergoes a supernatural transformation becoming beautiful with long black hair and fair skin. This change in appearance also leads to change in status of the elder wife. Her husband, who earlier did not value her now starts loving her after her transformation. "The lord of the two women returned from his travels and was struck with the long locks and beauty of the first wife. He loved her dearly" (Day 284). This shows how women are treated well only when they conform to beauty standards insinuating the idea that beauty has become a tool of acceptance. The younger wife on the other hand, no longer the prettier person, loses her status, power and love in the household, becoming their maid servant. The story explores the role of beauty in determining a woman's social status, power and happiness. It also discusses how a woman's worth is measured not by her inner qualities but by her external appearance. The story portrays women as commodities, as the husband shifts his affection solely based on looks, treating his wives as objects rather than individuals. Through the narrative of the two wives, we get to understand how women are both victims and enforcers of beauty standards and lookism, competing for male validation rather than challenging the system that oppresses them.

#### **Kanakabati's Radiance**

*Kanakabati's Radiance* is an Odia Folktale about Princess Kanakabati who is known across horizons for her unmatched beauty, especially her golden skin. Her beauty brought her admiration across kingdoms, but at the same time also made her the target of jealousy of a wicked witch. The witch casted a curse on the Princess that made her golden skin turn dark. The witch's jealousy and her actions highlight how women, conditioned by patriarchal expectations enforce jealousy-driven oppression. Her jealousy stems from a system where

---

beauty is established as a factor for determining one's worth, implying that one woman's beauty threatens another's status. Kanakabati's own father, the King, terrified by the sudden transformation banishes his daughter from the kingdom in the fear of the curse getting spread, instead of protecting her. Her banishment mirrors the real-world societal rejection of those who do not confirm to beauty standards. This shows how beauty dictates women's status in the society. After losing her radiance the Princess wanders in forest, abandoned and unappreciated. She gets back her respect and status only after she regains her beauty through supernatural means, by taking the help of a blind sage. Her own family that once abandoned her later accept her back after her beauty is reinstated. This highlights how society values women only when they fit into the accepted beauty ideals. Through her story we see how a woman's status and worth is connected to her appearance and not her actions. The story begins with praises of her unparalleled beauty, but once she loses that, she is discarded by her own family and kingdom. The story shows how women's beauty also determines their fate, as Kanakabati's downfall and redemption are both tied to her physical appearance rather than inner qualities or actions. It highlights how beauty is both a tool of power and a burden that dictates women's place in society and determines how they are valued by the people around them.

### **The Story of a King**

*The Story of a King* is a folktale from Tamil Nadu that demonstrates how beauty controls a woman's fate and dictates her value in society. The prince of a town desires to marry a girl who looks exactly like him. His demand reinforces the objectification of women as aesthetic possessions rather than individuals with their own identity. His ministers are sent to search for a matching object for him rather than a compatible partner, showing how women are commodified and judged solely based on their external beauty. The prince is regular to a prostitute's house, who out of jealousy, puts some lime paste on the photograph of his bride, making him believe that she is blind. She knows that her power over the prince depends on his belief that she is the most desirable woman, which will be sabotaged if the prince marries a beautiful woman. So, by making him believe that his wife is flawed, she ensures that he continues to seek her. This act causes the prince to reject his bride without even seeing her once, proving that a woman's worth is dictated entirely by her physical perfection and not by her inner qualities. The prince marries his bride out of compulsion but doesn't treat her as his wife. "From the very first day he refused to speak to her or even look at her" (Beck et al. 284). This highlights how beauty, rather than inner qualities, determines a woman's desirability in marriage. His refusal to look at her, interact or even stay with her reflects the dehumanization of women who do not fit into their husband's desired beauty standards. The new wife starts selling milk and is soon noticed by the prince, who unaware of the fact that she is his own wife, becomes attracted to her beauty. The same woman, who was earlier ignored and discarded, now becomes desirable when the prince notices her beauty. Her beauty gives her power over the prince and she drains him of all his wealth. The prostitute, wanting to elevate her beauty asks her about her beauty secrets, but this time the wife deliberately misleads her causing her tragic end. This also highlights how women are ready

---

to try various experiments only to elevate their beauty but these beauty transformations not always end up being successful. The prince returns home after the prostitute's death, notices the beauty of his wife and accepts her. The story highlights that in a patriarchal society, a woman's fate remains tied to her external appearance.

### **Portrayal of Beauty in Korean Folktales**

#### **The Tale of Lady Pak**

*The Tale of Lady Pak* is a Korean folktale that explores the themes of beauty, virtue, societal expectations and supernatural transformation. The story deals with the life of Lady Pak who is constantly mistreated at her in-laws place because of her physical appearance. She is described to be unattractive and physically deformed and her talents, intelligence and magical abilities are overlooked just because of the same. This reflects the patriarchal idea where a woman's worth is calculated from her external appearance rather than her inner qualities. The ill-treatment she faces from her mother-in-law shows how women themselves uphold and reinforce patriarchal expectations, ensuring that only those who meet societal beauty standards are accepted. However, it is revealed that Lady Pak's unattractiveness is not permanent but a curse which is later lifted transforming her into a beautiful maiden. This transformation causes her to be accepted back in the family, highlighting how a woman's worth is associated with her appearance. When she is unattractive, she is poorly treated but once she turns beautiful, she is happily accepted by all. This shows how women are often valued as commodities in a marriage, where their appearance determines their status. Her intelligence and her magical abilities are qualities that should have made her invaluable but it is her beauty that dictates her fate. Her transformation serves both as a story of liberation and confirmation of patriarchal ideals. Lady Pak's lack of beauty according to the societal standards initially led to her isolation and mistreatment but her transformation made her gain love, respect and acceptance. Her initial rejection highlights how women who do not conform to the societal beauty standards face lookism or discrimination while her later admiration reinforces the idea that beauty ensures status and respect.

#### **Chun Yang the Faithful Dancing-Girl Wife**

*Chun Yang the Faithful Dancing-Girl Wife* highlights the tension between beauty as a reward as well as a burden at the same time. The female protagonist, Chun Yang Ye is described to be extremely beautiful, making her desirable by all those who see her. Even when the male protagonist of the story, Toh Ryung first sees her, he is captivated by her physical beauty. This shows how external beauty, rather than inner virtues, is the first measure of woman's worth in the eyes of men. Her beauty can be seen as a reward for her that ensures her social mobility. Despite being the daughter of a dancer, her beauty attracts the noble man Toh Ryung and ensures her social mobility after their marriage. Throughout the story she is treated as a commodity, with her value tied to her ability to attract a noble husband. Her mother immediately accepts his proposal not because of his character but because of his social class. This reflects how women are often viewed as assets in patriarchal societies, their worth determined by their potential to secure advantageous marriages. Chun Yang Ye is treated as an object of desire by two men, both wanting to have her because of

---

her physical appearance. Further in the story, this beauty of hers becomes the cause of her suffering when a corrupt magistrate attempts to force himself upon her attracted by her unparalleled beauty. When he wishes to see her for the first time, she tries to hide her beauty by making her face look unclean, her hair disordered and wearing ill-fitting gown, only to draw his attention away from her but fails to do so (Allen 134). This shows how her beauty becomes a burden for her that she wishes to change and get rid of. The magistrate's desire for her doesn't show any sign of love but rather as form of possession he wishes to have. When she refuses him, he reacts not with respect but with violence, showing how she is treated as an object who has not followed his demands by rejecting him. She is expected not to have any voice of her own and give in to his advances without resisting. This highlights how beauty determines her identity and her treatment in the society. Chun Yang Ye's beauty can be seen both as a reward and a curse for her. It ensures Toh Ryung's love and forms her route to escape her lowly birth, but at the same time makes her vulnerable and a target of exploitation from the magistrate. Her beauty not only empowers her but also brings her suffering, emphasizing how beauty is a double-edged sword both a privilege and a curse.

### **Kongjwi and Patjwi**

*Kongjwi and Patjwi* narrates the story of two stepsisters who look completely different from each other, one is extremely beautiful and the other is described to be ugly. The beautiful Kongjwi, is mistreated by her ugly stepsister Patjwi and her cruel stepmother. They subject her to harsh labour and dress her in shabby clothes to hide her beauty. This highlights how women, particularly those who do not conform to societal beauty standards enforce patriarchal expectations of beauty on other women out of jealousy. When a dance is announced to select a bride for the magistrate, the step mother fearing Kongjwi's beauty will overshadow her daughter, doesn't allow her to go to the dance. Her stepmother constantly suppresses Kongjwi's beauty and opportunities in order to get spotlight on her own daughter. Her beauty becomes the cause of her suffering and makes her the target of her stepmother's cruelty. She is overworked, starved and denied opportunities simply because her beauty threatens her stepsister's chances at success. However, a celestial maiden, dresses up Kongjwi and sends her to the dance where she becomes the centre of attention because of her beauty. Kongjwi gets married to the magistrate who falls in love with her after seeing her in the dance. The magistrate wants to marry her only after seeing her physical beauty, he doesn't know anything about her but still falls in love. This highlights how she is treated as an object desired to be possessed only because of her external beauty not her inner quality. She immediately elevates to the position of a noble woman from a mistreated servant because of her beauty. Later in the story, Patjwi jealous of Kongjwi's new life kills her and takes her place in the magistrate's house. This shows how women try to get male validation and for it are ready to go into any lengths. This story highlights how beauty sometimes becomes a burden for women who are considered beautiful causing them to suffer throughout their lives for the same.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of these six stories from Indian and Korean traditions reveals that beauty acts as a force that dictates women's status, acceptance and treatment in patriarchal societies. The notion that beauty determines a woman's worth reflects how women are valued based on their appearance rather than their inner qualities. In *'The Tale of Lady Park'*, we get to see how the protagonist Lady Pak is mis-treated and isolated from her family because of her physical appearance with no one giving any value to her magical talents and abilities. Lady Pak is accepted back only after her curse is lifted and her true beauty comes to the surface. These narratives also highlight how beauty acts both as a burden and a reward, often reducing women to objects of desire. In *'Chun Yang the Faithful Dancing-Girl Wife'*, the corrupt magistrate desires to have Chun Yang Ye only after seeing her physical beauty, he has no love for her and wishes to achieve her as an object to behold. When she rejects his advances, he reacts with violence, capturing and torturing her. This shows how he expected her to be voiceless and give in to his demands without any resistance. At the same time her beauty also acted as a reward and secured her a marriage to a noble man ensuring her social mobility. The analysis of the stories also revealed how women themselves reinforce patriarchal beauty standards, favouring or oppressing other women based on their appearance. Women, often being victims of patriarchal structures, become enforcers of these ideals, continuing cycle of oppression in their desire for social mobility and validation. In the stories *'The Bald Wife'*, *'The Story of a King'*, *'Kanakabati's Radianc'* and also *'Kongjwi and Patjwi'*, we see how female characters try to sabotage the lives of other female characters out of female rivalry, jealousy or even in the desire of achieving male validation. They try to oppress those who do not conform to the societal beauty standards using their own physical beauty as a form of power. They even plot to cause physical harm to those they think to be of superior beauty than themselves, only out of jealousy. We can see Patjwi and the witch doing the same in the stories *'Kongjwi and Patjwi'* and *'Kanakabati's Radianc'*.

The analysis of these folk narratives shows how they are still relevant in the contemporary society, where beauty standards continue to remain a powerful force in dictating women's worth, opportunities and treatment in society. Women continue to face objectification even in modern times, with beauty being commodified through advertising, entertainment and digital culture. To break free from this cycle, society must redefine beauty beyond mere appearance and recognize women for their abilities, talents and inherent worth rather than reducing them to an object to be adorned or a commodity to be traded.

### Works Cited

- Allen, Horace Newton. Korean Tales. The Knickerbocker Press, 1889.  
 Beck, Brenda E. F., and Richard M. Dorson. Folktales of India. Univ. Of Chicago Pr, 1987.  
 Breeze. "The Story of the Korean Cinderella – Kongjwi and Patjwi." Koreabridge, 4 Sept. 2011,

- Chakraborty, Jhilik, and Arpita Goswami. "The Influence of Beauty Standards on Women's Lives: An Exploration of the Bald Wife, a Folk Story from West Bengal, through a Feminist Lens."
- Day, Lal Behari. Folk-Tales of Bengal. Good Press, 2019.
- Mohanty, Shanti. Folk Tales of Orissa. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1970.
- Patnaik, Leo. "Kanakabati's Radiance: An Odia Folktale of Curse, Courage, and Redemption." Folklore Chronicles, 13 July 2023,
- Pettid, Michael J., et al. Premodern Korean Literary Prose: An Anthology. Columbia University Press, 2018.
- Service (KOCIS), Korean Culture and Information. "Kongjiwi and Patjwi: Cinderella Tale Offers Insight into Old Korea: Korea.net: The Official Website of the Republic of Korea."
- Service (KOCIS), Korean Culture and Information. "The Tale of Chunhyang: True Love Conquers All in This Folklore Classic: Korea.net: The Official Website of the Republic of Korea."
- Willoughby, Heather. The Performance of Virtue and the Loss of Female Individuality in Chosŏn Korea: A Feminist Reading of the Tale of Ch'unhyang.