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A Deity Beyond Archives: Kotgari Devi, Oral Justice, and the Boundaries of Canonical Knowledge

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Abstract: This paper examines the oral traditions and local worship practices associated with Kotgari Devi, a regional goddess revered in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand, India. Kotgari Devi, as a deity of divine justice, possesses a deeply rooted presence in local consciousness but is notably absent from mainstream literary canons and academic discourse. This work critically engages with theories of oral literature and ecocriticism to re-establish oral storytelling, ritual, and folklore as valid and authoritative sources of knowledge. This study illustrates how the living traditions of Kotgari Devi contest prevailing modes of canon formation, archive-centricity, and institutional gatekeeping by referencing narratives of divine retribution, colonial interactions, and caste hierarchies. The villagers' personal experiences and ritual activities demonstrate a cultural memory that demands inclusion and refuses to be erased in broader literary and cultural discussions. This study advocates for a more expansive and inclusive understanding of scholarly value and knowledge production by focusing on a goddess whose authority extends beyond written documentation and judicial frameworks, promoting the growing demand to broaden the scope of literary studies and acknowledge the epistemic validity of regional, oral, and spiritual literatures.

Keywords: oral tradition; canon formation; ecocriticism; folklore; Kumaon

Introduction

The literary canon comprises significant and influential works within a specific genre or culture. It serves as a standard for assessing literary merit and generally comprises literature deemed essential for reading. The canon has progressively expanded to encompass broader perspectives, mirroring changes in contemporary norms. The term "canon" is derived from the Greek word *kanôn*, signifying a "straight rod," used in surveying and construction to guarantee alignment and precision. This notion was subsequently extended to literature to denote standards of accuracy and significance. Historically, the term "canon" has been employed in several contexts, including the classification of works within a specific tradition (e.g., the biblical canon) or the attribution of works to a single author (e.g., the Shakespearean canon). The canon is used as a standard for evaluating the worth and authenticity of literature globally; however, in the 1980s, scholars such as Edward Said and Terry Eagleton opposed the dominant notion, which was led by Harold Bloom, that the Western canon represented the most important and prestigious literature in the world. Critics contended that this collection omitted countless exceptional works from various cultures and viewpoints, while highlighting the inadequate representation of women and minority authors. Since then, the literary canon has expanded considerably to encompass numerous female writers and authors from diverse backgrounds, yet its inclusivity remains superficial. Despite these advances, regional oral traditions, particularly those founded in indigenous spiritual practices, remain under-represented in literary studies and oral literatures, which convey cultural, spiritual, and moral values through narrative, ritual, and song, are still seen as secondary to the written word, one such example is of the local lore of Kotgari Devi.

Kotgari Devi is a regional goddess worshipped as the goddess of justice in parts of the Kumaon region in Uttarakhand, also known as *Devbhoomi* or the abode of gods. The oral storytelling traditions of Uttarakhand are diverse and rich, featuring a wealth of myths, stories, and folktales that have been transmitted across generations. These legends often feature local deities, ancestral spirits, and moral teachings, reflecting the values and beliefs of the people. The oral traditions surrounding Kotgari Devi are more than just local folklore; they preserve cultural memory, justice systems, and representations of community identity. Nonetheless, these narratives have long been excluded from the literary canon, overshadowed by written works that correspond to European standards of literary value. According to Manish Kumar, "The Eurocentric notion of making select text prominent (center) marginalizes those that are rejected to the periphery. This idea is intrinsic to binary opposition, where one aspect remains at the center and the other marginalized" (150). This dynamic essentially makes Kumaon's sacred oral narratives invisible within dominant literary discourse, despite their continued importance and complexity. The narrative of Kotgari Devi, regarded as a goddess of justice and moral judge, plays a pivotal role in local spiritual administration, illustrating how community lore challenges the limits of canonical validity. Kumar adds, "Canon formation is sometimes considered indistinguishable from identity formation" (151). In this perspective, integrating Kotgari Devi's oral histories is more than just a literary inclusion; it is also a recovery of cultural identity and epistemic agency.

Anthropologists define culture as shared knowledge, beliefs, and practices that shape human societies. Edward Tylor describes culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". (qtd. in Sabloff). These stories support the authenticity of local knowledge systems, highlighting a tradition in which justice, divinity, and narrative are deeply linked. As a result, studying culture is crucial for understanding human communities. According to Sabloff, culture is fundamental to understanding all societies. "A prism through which we can understand people today, yesterday, and tomorrow". In other words, cultural analysis reveals how groups perceive the world, organise their institutions, and pass on values. Scholars can track societal structure and change by examining symbols, rituals, and everyday behaviors. In today's globalised society, cultural sensitivity helps bridge gaps by teaching respect for different ways of life and explaining why social behaviour varies between societies. To summarise, culture gives the lens and material for understanding any society, and through the goddess, the convergence of indigenous epistemologies, gendered divinity, ecological ethics, and moral justice is illustrated within a unified cultural framework.

While no written records exist to document the origin of Kotgari Devi, oral testimony passed down through generations offers insight into her sacred journey. In an interview with Mr. L. M. Pathak, a priest from the Pathak family who has served the deity for generations, it was revealed that the goddess is believed to have been brought from Jageshwar by the Chand rulers, a dynasty central to the history of Kumaon. According to tradition, during this divine relocation, the goddess chose her resting places along the route, asserting her presence through supernatural resistance. One such stop was Gilthigadha, where the bearers were mysteriously unable to proceed further with the goddess, a sign understood as her will to remain there temporarily. A temple still stands at this sacred site, commemorating the event. This narrative reinforces the agency of the goddess in selecting her sacred geography. It illustrates how divine intervention defines spatial sanctity in Kumaoni culture as much as human action. Although undocumented in state archives, the tale endures through oral remembrance and ritual continuity, thereby legitimizing the site and the goddess's origin in collective cultural memory.

Oral literature can serve social purposes, including both validating and warning against moral lapses. Fables, myths, legends, folk ballads, and cruxes hold significant meaning and can serve as valid documentation to represent moral, psychological, social, and political values in both ancient and modern times. "Oral literature conveys traditions, culture, beliefs, thoughts, and original intellectual possession of vernacular masses" (Nabil and Bismel 176).

Examining the oral traditions surrounding Kotgari Devi reveals that her stories are firmly rooted in local memory and historical experience, rather than abstract myth. This corresponds with Ruth Finnegan's observation that "there seems generally to be far more literary interest in historical narrative—in the deeds of historical heroes in the not so remote past—than in myths (in the sense of the actions of deities in the furthest past or of cosmological speculations)" (Finnegan 358–59). For example, the Joshi

family's story revolves around a real social setting of colonial control, caste identification, and agricultural labor. It depicts the goddess intervening personally in a morally sensitive domestic scenario. Far from a remote, metaphysical deity, Kotgari Devi appears as a proximal spiritual force embedded in local justice systems and everyday moral behavior. Her lore's merging of the factual and the spiritual confirms the value of oral stories and advocates for their inclusion in broader literary debates as politically and culturally significant works. Kotgari Devi worship creates a distinct spiritual hierarchy, with her viewed as the primary presiding deity of justice and moral authority. Bhanari Golu Devta, also known as her "minister," serves beneath her in this celestial bureaucracy, carrying out her judgments in practice. Subdued spirits and other supernatural agents are thought to operate under Golu Devta's leadership to carry out the goddess's decrees. This structure parallels earthly forms of governance while reinforcing divine order through localised cosmology. As a continuation of this concept, villagers frequently leave handwritten letters and legal stamp papers outside Kotgari Devi's temple, symbolically entrusting her with conflicts and complaints they believe are beyond the reach of human justice. This tradition illustrates how faith can serve as a cultural mechanism for justice, particularly in remote areas where state institutions are perceived as inaccessible or ineffective. In this approach, the goddess serves as both a celestial judgment and a cultural mediator. Furthermore, the ritual trek to Kotgari Devi's temple is incomplete unless the shrine of Bhairava, located nearby, is visited on the way back. This represents ritual completion and spiritual protection, as Bhairava is historically regarded as a guardian deity who purifies and secures the devotee after an encounter with powerful heavenly forces. The interrelated worship traditions and spiritual hierarchy represent not only a complex network of divine duties but also the incorporation of Shaiva-Shakta cosmology, which is widespread in Kumaoni villages, where deities collaborate to maintain cosmic and moral equilibrium. This multidimensional interaction among deities reinforces the collective vision that justice, dedication, and cosmic order are interconnected in the people's spiritual and lived reality. Literary academics primarily focus on a text's cultural context and its reflection and engagement with the society in which it exists, rather than solely on its orality. Insights from M. Ngal's essay are essential for understanding the performer's function within their cultural heritage. Such investigations enhance our ability to critically evaluate and convey the essence and significance of traditional narratives. "Tales, proverbs, riddles, enigmas, etc, not only reflect societies in their globality, but are also agents of transmission of traditional culture" (Ngal 342).

The deities play a significant role in ecological conservation in Kumaon. This can be witnessed when the Panchayat decides which forest area will be dedicated to the regional deities and for what duration. This practice can be seen in the case of Kotgari Devi, as fields and forests are dedicated to the goddess and even donated permanently, this land is referred to as "*Goonth*". This act, while religious, has deep ecological significance, serving as an indigenous model for biodiversity preservation. From an ecocritical standpoint, donating land to Kotgari Devi is an act of sacralization—the process by which landscapes become infused with spiritual meaning. This spiritual ownership establishes prohibitions and restrictions on activities such as logging,

hunting, and agricultural encroachment. Such limitations serve ecological roles similar to modern conservation regulations, but are based on religious principles rather than legislation. Ecocriticism emphasises the interdependence of human civilisation and the nonhuman world. The devotion to Kotgari Devi elevates local ecological activity to a culturally rooted level of stewardship. Fields and forests devoted to her are viewed as sacred trusts, rather than exploited commodities. In effect, the deity serves as a legendary land steward, resulting in a theocentric ecology in which ethical and spiritual values guide human relationships with nature.

This type of land management stands in stark contrast to the anthropocentric frameworks of modern industrial agriculture and forestry, which often result in habitat fragmentation and biodiversity loss. Kotgari Devi's apparent authority facilitates what modern environmental law struggles to achieve in remote or tribal areas: compliance and communal guardianship. While regulations require governmental enforcement, Kotgari Devi's spiritual jurisdiction encourages voluntary adherence, making it a practical example of grassroots conservation. Furthermore, unlike secular conservation systems, which may alienate local populations, the religious context of Kotgari Devi promotes a sense of belonging and responsibility. The participatory conservation mindset is crucial to the success of any biodiversity initiative. These sacred groves, which offer a distinctive perspective on conservation, are guided by cultural values and taboos instead of formal legal structures. They preserve various habitats and contain tremendous promise for biodiversity protection. Such sites offer protection to habitats and species that are excluded from statutory protected areas, and this approach to conservation is more widely accepted among local people. These groves often have accompanying myths and prohibitions on the use of the region's natural resources. (Singh *et al.* 34)

Including the oral traditions of Kotgari Devi in the literary canon is essential because it challenges the longstanding dominance of written, Eurocentric texts and broadens the scope of what is considered valuable literature. The literary canon, as a standard for evaluating literary merit, has historically marginalized regional and indigenous voices, especially those preserved through oral storytelling and ritual. By recognizing Kotgari Devi's narratives as legitimate literary works, the canon would better reflect the diversity of human experience and cultural expression, acknowledging that knowledge and meaning are not confined to written archives. This inclusion would validate the epistemic authority of oral traditions, affirming their role in shaping community identity, moral values, and historical memory. Moreover, it would address the power imbalance in literary studies, where certain forms of storytelling are privileged while others are relegated to the periphery.

Furthermore, adding Kotgari Devi's stories to the canon would serve as a model for how literature can engage with issues of justice, ecology, and social cohesion in ways that written texts alone cannot. Oral traditions often function as living archives, adapting to new contexts and maintaining relevance across generations. They provide unique insights into the relationship between humans, the divine, and the natural world, offering perspectives deeply rooted in local realities yet universally resonant.

Integrating these narratives into the literary canon would honor the creativity and wisdom of indigenous communities and encourage scholars and readers to reconsider the boundaries of literature itself. Ultimately, such inclusion would foster a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of literary value that embraces the full spectrum of storytelling traditions as essential to the human experience.

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