

**Nefarious Stepmothers and Childhood Formation: Patriarchal
Juxtaposition of Female Agency in the Brothers Grimm and *Thakurmar
Jhuli***

By

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

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2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
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Abstract

This thesis offers a comparative study of the iniquitous depiction of stepmothers in the Brothers Grimm fairy tales and Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's Bengali collection *Thakurmar Jhuli*. Despite emanating from distinct cultural and historical backgrounds, both collections demonstrate shared themes of maternal envy, sibling rivalry, economic destitution, and the justified consequences of antagonistic actions. Grimm tales often confront maternal malevolence with vivid punishments referencing Christian moral binaries and patriarchal regulations. Contrarily, *Thakurmar Jhuli* resolves stepmother ferocity through spiritual justice, where divine intervention disciplines the vile figures instead of punitive retribution. Therefore, this research examines the stepmother as a universal archetype and a culturally inflected representative for mediating patriarchal power as well as maintaining social order, restraining women's agency, and impacting psychological aspects of childhood by drawing on critical feminist interpretations, violence studies, and psychoanalytical viewpoints. Concurrently, it reveals how children manage their negative emotions while engaging with the function of these fairy tales.

Keywords: evil stepmother, patriarchy, Brothers Grimm, Thakurmar Jhuli, feminist criticism, childhood

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my mother, Seema Talukder, who has always supported me throughout my entire life, especially during my journey at BRAC. Her constant encouragement has greatly influenced my experience in crafting this paper. Without her utmost love and care, I would not have been able to complete this work on time.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Peace in patriarchy is war against women.” - German Sociologist Maria Mies expresses the central idea of patriarchal consequences on people, especially on women, through this particular utterance. Most of the time, men intentionally bring out symbolic justice and peace in their surroundings by vilifying women in others’ eyes and punishing them to provide satisfaction. As a result, the division among women spreads, and instead of confronting this problematic notion together, they start to compete against each other. These circumstances are prominently expressed through the appearance of evil stepmother figures in stories across several cultures, especially in the Brothers Grimm fairy tales and Bengali folk tales, *Thakurmar Jhuli*. Their characters can be differentiated through their distinct representations, as the Brothers Grimm portray human beings as monstrous because of their destructive nature. In contrast, Bengali portrayal often brings out the devilish characteristics through a *rakshasi*¹. These characters are the most complex and repetitive symbols of children’s literature, as their actions are responsible for the progression of the plot. Through their descriptions, the themes of violence as well as male domination emerge, and the aspects of society’s predetermined notion towards women’s abilities, motherhood, and desires unfold in these fairy tales.

The stigmatised role of the evil stepmother in fairy tales does not necessarily depict negative energy; rather, they represent society’s controversial conception of motherhood and specified gender roles. Although these fairy tales are innocently narrated for children to provide moral lessons, they usually conceal complicated thoughts and themes. These hidden impressions are delivered through these stepmother characters, influencing children’s growth in this

¹ A female demon or ogress. The demoness is often disguised as a royal queen in Bengali folk tales, *Thakurmar Jhuli*.

environment and society's perspectives towards women's empowerment and independence. This specific illustration of evil stepmother characters in fairy tales is seen in both Central Europe and South Asia. From the believers of Christian ideology to the followers of Hinduism and Buddhism, the Brothers Grimm and *Thakurmar Jhuli* reveal the corresponding ideas towards women and their disparate methods of managing their activities. The consistent use of stepmothers as a trope in these fairy tales broadens our thoughts regarding identical patriarchal norms present in respective cultural situations and narrative structures.

1.1 Problem Statement and Methodology

This paper conducts qualitative research by integrating existing literary analysis from various cultural perspectives. The study closely examines the primary sources from both the Brothers Grimm collection and the Bengali collection *Thakurmar Jhuli* to explore the similarities and differences of narrative patterns and the representation of the characters. By comparing the selected tales from both collections, featuring the depraved stepmother figures, this research recognises the continual themes considering the cultural differences in their demonstration. It also incorporates several feminist viewpoints to identify the patriarchal exploitation, concepts of violence to understand the punitive methods, and psychoanalytic theories to present the functions of childhood. Additionally, the study discovers the equivalent human concerns in culture-specific narrative methods, providing a comprehensive understanding of these complicated characters through a cross-cultural analysis.

Many scholarly researchers of fairy tales are still inadequate in understanding the pattern of the evil stepmother character in separate cultures. Many critics have emphasised the patriarchal reinforcement in Central European fairy tales collected by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.

Nevertheless, the comparative discussion of similar portrayals between Central European and South Asian cultures is yet to be discovered. South Asian *Thakurmar Jhuli*, assembled by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar in the late nineteenth century, has several examples of maternal antagonists. Much existing research offers the exploration of evil stepmother characters through feminist criticism, psychoanalysis, or violence theories, which is fixed in a single culture. To understand the complexities of these characters, who complete multiple responsibilities that vary from culture to culture, this approach needs to be more comprehensive. The purpose of these characters is to influence childhood concerns, reinforce traditional gender roles, serve as scapegoats for social orders, and represent complicated family dynamics.

For that reason, this paper works on these gaps by providing a thorough comparative exploration amalgamating different viewpoints to recognise the function of monstrous stepmother figures in both Central European and South Asian fairy tales. It utilises a multifaceted framework that combines feminist literary criticism, psychoanalytic concepts, violence theories, and cultural comparisons. It helps to understand the violent female characters crafted by men, the impacts of these characters on children's intellectual and emotional development, and the similarities in portraying the psychological and social involvement that appear distinctively in various cultural settings. The core analysis revolves around Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's discourse of the "angel/monster" dichotomy in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. This particular concept of dividing women's nature into either the nourishing figure or the abominable character expresses the patriarchal pattern in literature that deliberately restricts the agency of women within rigid structures that challenge their identities.

They use “anxiety of authorship” to explain women’s fear of not being able to create original work, and the patriarchal domination and expectations are responsible for suppressing their creativity. The division between obedient virtue and obstinate monstrosity results in producing indecision in women’s self-expression. Furthermore, René Girard’s proposition of mimetic violence and the scapegoat mechanism in *Violence and the Sacred* provides the knowledge of patriarchal misinformation towards women’s relationships with other women. Patriarchy highlights the disastrous competition among women and their satisfaction in punishing their competitors through the stepmother narratives. However, these portrayals prove societal insecurities about the capability and authority of women. Girard shows how society, especially men, tries to demean women by rewarding the victim for accepting their chosen roles and punishing the evil stepmother as the scapegoat to restore patriarchal order and undermine the actual reason, revealing their collective anxieties.

Besides, Walter Benjamin’s argument in “Critique of Violence” suggests that rejuvenation of the patriarchal order is thoroughly connected with the evil women’s evocative punishments that can be featured as a spectacle for the future female sinners. This delivers insights into how these excessive punishments against the female antagonist are associated with the existing power dynamics. The vivid punishment of Snow White’s evil stepmother, painfully dancing in red-hot iron shoes till her death in Grimm’s “Snow White,” or being compressed to death by the bird’s hurled millstone in “The Juniper Tree,” serves as a necessary lesson in exchange for disobeying patriarchal norms. Additionally, Michel Foucault’s discourse of disciplinary power and authority of gender in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* exhibits how fairy tales teach the young generations about the traditional gender roles that cannot be disregarded in order to avoid punishment. These stories are used to manage women and their activities.

The evil stepmother's fate at the end of these stories suggests the consequences of disobeying the expected gender responsibilities. The negativity illustrated through the character hints at gender hierarchies and power that is also decided by men in society. At the same time, Slavoj Žižek talks about three types of violence: subjective, objective, and systemic in *Violence*, and they all have distinctive ways of blaming the stepmother, who is also the victim of the societal structure. Their function in these stories highlights different volumes of patriarchal and social control. The subjective violence indicates the wrongdoings and the punishment of the character that can be noticeable; the objective violence lies in the language that is used to stereotype women, such as calling them wicked, evil, and so on, and the systemic violence is about the societal needs that make the surroundings of women difficult.

Žižek attempts to understand the satisfaction the audience receives by witnessing the punishment. It works as a spectacle for their inner enjoyment while at the same time, they maintain moral superiority. Žižek calls the psychology behind this behaviour "superego injunction," which is society's hypocritical acts in both permitting and demanding the violence against women (Žižek 35). They enjoy the sufferings of those who dare to break the laws created by them. In "Little Brother and Little Sister", the stepmother is punished by being burned to death when her deception is revealed, exemplifying this transformation of violence into moral entertainment. Through this discussion, the pattern of these fairy tales is exposed through the ideological structure that creates aggression against rebellious women. Here, the punishment seems justified and, to some extent, even enjoyable.

Jacques Lacan explains the concept of the mirror stage in *Écrits*, which provides significant insights into how evil stepmother figures are responsible for facilitating childhood identity

formation. The mirror stage represents the moment when a child can realise their identity as a “self”. However, this recognition does not align with their lived experience, as it is often perceived as perfect and coordinated. The “self” that the child sees in the mirror is known as “Ideal I,” as Lacan emphasises. When a mother appears in a child’s life as a vile character, she ruins the ideal image of a nourishing mother in the child’s imagination. As a result, they are provided with a distorted maternal mirror that is unreliable and cruel. In “Shukhu aar Dukhu”, Dukhu receives mistreatment from her stepmother, which later affects her identity formation that Lacan describes as “misrecognition” (Lacan 204). When the child compares their painful experience with the idealised version, their growth is formulated through traumatic realisation. Similarly, the young readers who witness these harsh scenarios as they read, realise a feeling of competition to gain ideal recognition and love. Through this feeling, they start to have a negative energy towards the nefarious character.

1.2 Primary Textual Foundations and Cultural Significance

To understand the complex representation of villainous stepmother figures across different cultural practices, this comparative study analyses selected tales from the Brothers Grimm collection and the Bengali collection *Thakurmar Jhuli* by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar. Fourteen² specific tales of Brothers Grimm that showcase varied manifestation of maternal antagonism includes “Snow White”, “Hansel and Gretel”, “Cinderella”, “The Juniper Tree”, “The Three Little Men in the Wood”, “The Six Swans”, “Mother Holle”, “Little Brother and Little

² The Brothers Grimm has a diverse collection of fairy tales containing disparate themes that create opportunities for thorough exploration. However, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s collection reveals fewer stories with limited themes. Only a small number of stories embody stepmother cruelty in their narratives. So, the choices become deficient during the selection of stories from *Thakurmar Jhuli* during the analysis.

Sister”, “One-Eye, Two-Eyes, and Three-Eyes”, “The Lambkin and the Little Fish”, “The White Bride and the Black One”, “Sweetheart Roland”, “Foundling-Bird”, and “The True Bride”. These Central European stories were collected during the early 19th century, demonstrating the social anxieties towards women’s autonomy within patriarchal structures.

Additionally, four tales from *Thakurmar Jhuli*, including “Neelkamal aar Lalkamal” (“নীলকমল আর লালকমল”), “Shukhu aar Dukhu” (“সুখু আর দুখু”), “Shit-Basanta” (“শীত-বসন্ত”), and “Shat Bhai Champa” (“সাত ভাই চম্পা”) are featured to understand the comparison from separate cultural traditions. These narratives present a supernatural antagonism offering symbolic family conflicts that can be resolved through spiritual intervention. Although this particular portrayal is utilised as a universal archetype, its demonstration is different based on distinct cultural traditions. Through this comparative study, the prominent feature of patriarchal anxiety that revolves around women’s agency can be identified. Therefore, this thesis analyses how patriarchal constructs reinforce gender hierarchies and provide significant influence for childhood development through the demonstration of evil stepmother figures in the Brothers Grimm fairy tales and Bengali *Thakurmar Jhuli*, expressing the universal concerns of patriarchy about maternal authority. These anxieties are manifested through different culture-specific narrative techniques, which indicate the structured oppression of women’s autonomy while showcasing a satisfactory resolution to familial pressure.

Chapter 2: Understanding the Function of Evil Stepmothers and Childhood Development through Existing Literary Knowledge

The familiarity in illustrating the complicated nature of wicked stepmothers in fairy tales suggests society's stereotypical perspective of women's ability and authority in families. To identify the nature of these characters in fairy tales from both Central European and South Asian cultures, this paper utilises different findings of several scholarly texts. These authors singlehandedly find out the motive and the pattern of using the stepmother as a trope in children's literature. The combination of feminist literary criticism, violence studies, and psychoanalytic perspectives from distinct theorists and researchers points out the thought process behind these evil female portrayals. Their presence does not appear as a simple villain in children's stories; rather, they reflect the psychological and social views of people towards femininity and their relationships.

2.1 Feminist Viewpoints towards Gender Specificity

Literature has long been dominated by male writers spreading their perspectives with the blend of societal rules and regulations in their writings. The monstrous female characters who are the highlighted villains in a story have also been created by stereotypical male writers. As a result, the notion of being a rebellious woman through dismissing those social orders has been fixed in people's minds. So, whenever a female writer tries to express their creative thoughts in the form of writing, they get discouraged by the societal expectations. Therefore, the core discussion of this study revolves around the idea of "anxiety of authorship" introduced by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their noteworthy creation, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. In the book they mentioned that

“the “anxiety of influence”³ that a male poet experiences is felt by a female poet as an even more primary “anxiety of authorship”-a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a “precursor” the act of writing will isolate or destroy her” (Gilbert and Gubar 48-49). Unlike Harold Bloom’s theory, which put emphasis on male writers defeating the influence of the earlier poets, possibly their icons, Gilbert and Gubar mention a separate struggle of the female writers. They fear the possibility of being judged for their creativity, and not being inspiring role models to inspire others. As a result, their innovation will spread the essence of isolation or destruction.

Following this particular discussion, they incorporated the “angel/monster” dichotomy that can be seen in several male-centric perspectives of women in literature. “They attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of herself - that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity” (Gilbert and Gubar 48). Here, the “angel” refers to the ideal woman who is obedient and submissive, self-sacrificing, and devoted to serving me. Conversely, the “monster” is the complete opposite of an angelic character who represents the defiant women going against the traditional gender roles structured by the male authoritarians. Anna Nkomo argues:

³ Harold Bloom, in his journal article titled “Coleridge: The Anxiety of Influence,” discusses Coleridge’s “anxiety of influence”. It is known as the poets’ psychological struggle that they experience during the creation of their own identity and creativity with the shadow of their antecedents. He states Coleridge’s situation by mentioning “the fear of solipsism is greater in him than the fear of not individuating his own imagination” (Bloom 37). In the context of Coleridge, the meaning suggests that this is a feeling when strong poets try to establish an imaginative space for themselves while feeling the pressure of the past and the domination of the earlier poets, particularly Milton. This results in the need to question their own creation by reinterpreting, revising, or even misinterpreting the predecessors’ works. Their admiration for the influential poets still exists; however, the desire to assert their individual voice in poetry creates indecision in their minds.

Since fairy tales portray a reflection of societal norms, the portrayal of mothers and especially stepmothers in many fairy tales often perpetuates certain gender roles and stereotypes, which ultimately shape society's perception of motherhood. In fairy tales, one never shows compassion towards a stepmother as the stepmother is an archetypal image and not a true representation of a person who has values, desires, and thoughts. (Nkomo 1)

This division hints at the stereotypical thoughts of the male social makers who try to dominate women and their creative practices. They project their inner insecurity to forcefully establish the symbolic power by undermining women. The figure of evil stepmother serves as a clear example of this "monster" concept, showing that consequences of taking charge instead of being the angelic figure lead to a disastrous fate at the end.

Snowden states in his book chapter titled "Fairy Tale Film in the Classroom: Feminist Cultural Pedagogy, Angela Carter, and Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves*" that "such concepts reinforce oppressive ideals of gender" (Snowden 165). Subsequently, another argument appears in a review work referencing the impacts of these representations on societal perceptions of gender roles. They say "society is currently obsessed with the creatures and characters from these tales" (Estrada 185). Another author emphasises Grimm fairy tales' pattern of gender-specific identities and behaviour implementing societal norms regarding gender. "Bottigheimer argued that the image of women in the tales resulted in part from Wilhelm's increasing reliance on misogynistic folktales from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (Haase 25). As a result, these choices deteriorate strong female characteristics in those who could have shone having the proper opportunities, and impose a male-centric perspective affecting the representation of women in Grimm fairy tales. Prerana Sana says in this regard that "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” (Sana 334).

Many feminist critics point out how society uses these problematic characters created from their own imagination as “scapegoats” in order to show how the treatment can be served to a woman in response to the negative aspects when the angelic attributes are missing. They want to spread the benefits of being a “good mother” and the punishments of being the opposite. René Girard’s theory of “mimetic rivalry” and the “scapegoat mechanism” in *Violence and the Sacred* focuses on these arguments. Girard says, “man and his desires thus perpetually transmit contradictory signals to one another,” indicating how “mimetic desire” forces us to want what others have (Girard 147). So, humans imitate others in order to fulfill their inner blank space. However, this imitation often leads to rivalry and conflict. When society fails to deal with this intense chaos, it unfairly chooses a victim or a scapegoat to bring peace. For instance, in Grimm’s “Hansel and Gretel”, the stepmother becomes the scapegoat for disregarding the economic instabilities in the family. Nobody tries to provide an effective solution to the problem, but rather remembers to punish the mother by making her die for abandoning the child.

Girard extends the discussion, saying “whatever deception is involved in the sacrificial act must be attributed to the scapegoat mechanism, not to its beneficiaries” (271). That means stepmothers absorb these collective social anxieties, and it gets easier to target them for blame without threatening the standard of motherhood. These are not considered conscious manipulation to gain something in return; rather, they are complex psychological concepts known as the scapegoat mechanism. Bacchilega and Rieder state in this regard “the gestures of rebellion against patriarchal convention are only pretexts setting up its eventual triumphant celebration” (Bacchilega and Rieder 33). This act of resistance against the societal norms helps to reinforce those norms

instead. Sometimes, these characters are created in order to reveal the inner disturbance of the creators. They try to express their hatred through the female characters. Through this practice, they can both establish their vengeance and hierarchy. “It is described as a form of psychological manipulation which relies on an emotionally intelligent witch who derives her power and status from the exploitation of shared social narratives” (Hutchings-Budd 15). In fairy tales, these wicked stepmothers use their intellectual property to manipulate others, like the creator of these archetypes does with the audience.

Daisy Majumdar demonstrates a distinct idea about these stereotypes, saying even if these witches hold the maximum power in harming others, they still exist in the domestic spheres. The patriarchal notion does not even let them be rebellious outside in their portrayals. Majumdar argues:

In the male-dominated tales of epics and other grand narratives in the Indian mythical tradition, the male *rakshasa* holds sway – whereas in the domestic context of folk and fairy tales, usually narrated by the women in the family, the *rakshasi* occurs more frequently. Thus, the world of evil is almost always gendered according to its context. The *rakshasi* is the female counterpart of the *rakshas*, a demoniacal figure conventionally associated with evil and supernatural powers. She is often presented as a shape-shifter who dons the form of beauty to allure her victims before she destroys them. (Majumdar 74)

Similarly, Christy Willams in her journal article titled “Who’s Wicked Now? The Stepmother as Fairy-Tale Heroine” says “while Coover takes on the task of disassociating “wicked” from “step-mother,” he does not try to make a wholly virtuous character. Instead, Coover leaves his stepmother a witch who tries to destroy her fellow characters, shifting not her action, but its

context” (Williams 265). That means the actions of the stepmother are not the responsibility of the character; rather, they are the victim of the story’s context.

On the other hand, she explains in her book chapter titled “The Shoe Still Fits: Ever After and the Pursuit of a Feminist Cinderella” that “the stepmother acts as a female agent of patriarchy, ensuring that patriarchal ideals of gender behaviour and hierarchy are not solely perpetuated through male figures” (Williams 107). That means the stepmother character works as an agent of patriarchy in fairy tales, but the role is performed by a woman instead of a man. It indicates that patriarchy has influenced many women to maintain the ideals of this notion alongside men. On the contrary, Kajori Patra expresses a positive aspect of these illustrations. She says, “at first glance, it might seem that the tales have minimal space for development of a woman’s character as anything but the protagonist’s rewards/love interests, but notably, the prime antagonists are often women, and not barely incidental, but powerful she-demons and evil queens” (Patra 16-17). According to her, it is common in multiple tales that the author uses the female character as a reward for the prince or the king who can achieve them in exchange for their victory. However, these female antagonists can be highlighted through their significant positions in the stories.

2.2 Perception of Violence in Stepmother Narratives

Walter Benjamin has provided a foundational exploration of stepmother violence through the pattern of punishment in “Critique of Violence”. He distinguishes between “mythic violence,” which establishes boundaries, and “divine violence,” which works as a boundless annihilation (Benjamin 248-250). He says, “all violence as a means is either lawmaking or law-preserving” (243). This indicates the establishment of patriarchal order through punishing the evil stepmothers as they try to prove their superiority by applying their notion. On the other hand, they also want to preserve their regulations by continuously using them on the vile characters. The grotesque nature

of the punishments, such as the stepmother's death in red-hot iron shoes in "Snow White" or being compressed by a millstone in "The Juniper Tree," creates what Benjamin describes as a "spectacle" that serves superior powers. The female characters who dare to disobey the rules that others follow obediently deserve to be a public entertainment, warning others of the shameful and violent consequences.

Benjamin also expresses that "mythic violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake; divine violence is pure power over all life for the sake of the living. The first demands sacrifice; the second accepts it" (250). It indicates that society prefers mythic violence while punishing the stepmothers, disregarding the search for the definite reason for the chaos to provide proper justice. Michel Foucault's analysis in *Discipline and Punish* explains how stepmothers are considered the 'bad woman' who are often punished not for actual violence but for violating gender norms. Foucault argues that "the examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalising judgement", subjecting bodies to continuous surveillance (Foucault 184). The intention of these stories is to teach the young girls about the acceptable gender norms and the harsh consequences of defying those norms. They highlight the negative consequences of the stepmother characters to create examples of their superiority. Instead, they hide the fact that this disruption in domestic hierarchies, challenge male authority.

Foucault notes that "discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (170). It demonstrates the purpose of fairy tales to discipline women to shape their identity as a whole. His observation that "the power of the Norm appears through the disciplines" (Foucault 184) reveals how fairy tales' portrayal of punishment establishes a standard for feminine behaviour that they should strictly adhere to. René Girard's theory of "mimetic rivalry" and the "scapegoat mechanism" in

Violence and the Sacred deepens this analysis. Girard observes that “man and his desires thus perpetually transmit contradictory signals to one another,” which creates competition between the stepmother and the stepdaughter for beauty, status, inheritance, and the father’s attention (Girard 147). Instead of belittling the narrative’s plot as a whole, they prefer shifting the negative focus to a single character so that they can save themselves from collective aggression.

As Girard notes, “whatever deception is involved in the sacrificial act must be attributed to the scapegoat mechanism, not to its beneficiaries,” demonstrating how stepmothers preserve the ideal of motherhood by taking the collective blame on themselves (271). This idea explains how the negative female characters confirm their guilt to save the status of the obedient female character and maintain harmony and peace. Greenhill et al. argues that “indeed, in the Grimms’ “The Juniper Tree,” the mother gets the final blame. Her death has no negative consequences for anyone, though the story repeatedly attributes her actions to the devil” indicating how the stepmother is blamed for all the evil actions in narratives and despite dying so horribly, her death does not create any further sorrows for anyone but rather brings ultimate peace (Greenhill 129). So, in the story, the stepmother’s horrifying death is justified for restoring social order. Landwehr further explains that “the Grimms’ tale with its allusions to brutality and murder clearly serves as an extended metaphor for the terrors of war, particularly for women,” highlighting that, women were always in the centre of inflicting violence. It started from the war and continues in the folk tales as well (Landwehr 137).

Furthermore, Slavoj Žižek provides a deep understanding of violence by explaining the types of violence that include subjective, objective, and systemic violence in *Violence*. While the readers focus on the subjective violence that occurs against the children due to the negative actions of the stepmother, Žižek extends the discussion by showing concern for the singular focus. Žižek

emphasises that “Is there not something suspicious, indeed symptomatic, about this focus on subjective violence—that violence which is enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds? Doesn’t it desperately try to distract our attention from the true locus of trouble, by obliterating from view other forms of violence and thus actively participating in them?” (Žižek 10-11). Objective violence can be identified through the linguistic construction of stepmother characters through terms such as “wicked,” “evil,” and “cruel,” which reduce complex female characters to ordinary moral examples. By using these specific words to address the stepmothers, they try to hide the systemic faults in society from the readers. As Žižek argues, “objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent” (2).

Systemic violence is considered the most fundamental form of violence that indicates the patriarchal family structures that create the needs of stepmother figures because of absent mothers, economic pressures forcing remarriage, and gender hierarchies that limit women’s agency. Žižek explains that “systemic violence is thus something like the notorious ‘dark matter’ of physics,” which “may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seems to be ‘irrational’ explosions of subjective violence” (2). Furthermore, Žižek notes that this systemic violence operates through “the complex interaction of the three modes of violence: subjective, objective, and symbolic. The lesson is thus that one should resist the fascination of subjective violence, of violence enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds: subjective violence is just the most visible of the three” (11). The power of stepmother narratives lies in their ability to obscure systemic patriarchal violence by focusing attention on subjective violence, thereby allowing society to identify problems while avoiding deeper structural critique.

2.3 Psychoanalytic Perspectives and Childhood Development

Psychoanalytic perspectives extend these insights by examining how violence shapes childhood identity formation. Lacan's mirror-stage theory in *Écrits* reveals that children's self-recognition is distorted because of their harsh experience with the stepmother. Lacan writes that "the role of the mirror apparatus in the appearance of *doubles*, in which psychical realities manifest themselves that are, moreover, heterogeneous" (Lacan 77). In "Cinderella", the stepmother's favouritism toward her own daughters forces young readers to confront their perceived deficiencies, mirroring Lacan's insight that identity forms through painful recognition of alterity. Stephen Colvin argues that "perception is changed to one of imagination," providing children with symbolic frameworks for processing trauma (Colvin 328). Bahn and Hong's cross-cultural study finds that as tales shift from wicked to neutral stepmothers, they reflect evolving societal anxieties about maternal authority, suggesting that stepmother figures reflect cultural negotiations of female power and child welfare (Bahn and Hong 841-42).

Alan Dundes critiques Bruno Bettelheim's methods but concedes that tales offer essential schemas for processing trauma, enabling children to externalise fears of abandonment onto stepmother figures (Dundes 74). "In Bettelheim's opinion, fairy tales were helpful to children "in helping them cope with the psychological problems of growing up and integrating their personalities"" (74). Kay Stone's study of Disney's stepmothers notes that cinematic amplifications of cruelty serve moral pedagogy, teaching young viewers normative lessons through vivid violence (Stone 45). H. E. Wheeler cautions that such tales may distort children's imagination by promoting primitive, magical thinking if uncontextualised (Wheeler 754-55); however, they remain potent tools for emotional rehearsal.

Maria Tatar emphasises that the Grimms' tales themselves present hard facts of brutality that offer unsparing lessons in the costs of defying social norms, arguing that the violence in these stories functions as unvarnished moral instruction for young readers (Tatar 20-21). Tatar's expanded analysis reveals how exposure to these hard facts supports emotional resilience by framing violence as inevitable yet meaningful, thus aiding children's moral development. She says "the depiction of physical violence in fairy tales has a special appeal for children, and not only in connection with the punishment of villains" (21). The intention was to shift the violence directed toward children onto evil influences or stepmothers so that children could have a subject through which they could express their anxieties. "The more Hansel, Gretel, Cinderella, and Snow White are victimized by the powers of evil, the more sympathy they elicit and the more captivating they are for children" (21).

John Rosegrant's analysis of revisionist fairy tales highlights shifts in maternal representation. He contends that modern retellings stress "permeability of ego boundaries and mirrors," reflecting an increased focus on children's inner lives (Rosegrant 257). These adaptations often soften stepmother cruelty, offering alternative paths to reconciliation rather than punitive spectacle. Fairy tales often show evil stepmothers in a way that reflects society's fears about women in power and motherhood. These characters appear both scary and normal, highlighting the struggle between traditional stereotypes and personal freedom. Using feminist criticism, violence studies, and psychological ideas helps us understand how they represent male control, are targets for blame from the community, and are tools for children's emotional growth. These stories reveal and strengthen gender power dynamics while giving young audiences ways to understand their identity and trauma. This analysis provides a foundation for comparing different cultures and

helps us see both common psychological themes and unique representations of the stepmother figure in Central European and South Asian stories.

Chapter 3: Central European Conception of Maternal Evil in Brothers Grimm Fairy Tales

In the Grimm Brothers fairy tales, having a villainous figure for the story's progression is a common phenomenon. However, the consistent use of the evil stepmother figure in these tales indicates the patriarchal demonstration and power towards women's agency. Through these portrayals, they express entrenched patriarchal anxieties that create issues among women. To understand the pattern of the stepmother figures in fairy tales, one needs to dive into the cultural and historical context of that particular tradition so that the influence behind their creation can be identified. Through the comparative frameworks of the Brothers Grimm tales and the Bengali *Thakurmar Jhuli* collection, the observation of different cultures comes to light. There was a striking difference between 19th-century Germany and colonial Bengal in representing maternal evil. Both cultures express their concerns about family dynamics, traditional gender roles, and patriarchal social order through the vile characteristics of stepmothers.

Nevertheless, their specific cultural practices shape the unique way of representing a character that threatens femininity. Therefore, this chapter provides an examination of the selected Grimm stories that includes "Snow White", "Hansel and Gretel", "Cinderella", "The Juniper Tree", "The Three Little Men in the Wood", "The Six Swans", "Mother Holle", "Little Brother and Little Sister", "One-Eye, Two-Eyes, and Three-Eyes", "The Lambkin and the Little Fish", "The White Bride and the Black One", "Sweetheart Roland", "Foundling-Bird", and "The True Bride", highlighting their cultural contexts in shaping the evil stepmother archetypes. It also considers their collection process and social interference in influencing their meaning. Through the analysis of historical and cultural contexts, understanding of the narrative patterns, and

psychological aspects, this exploration illustrates the pattern of Central European stepmother figures embodying patriarchal anxieties while indicating the process of moral instructions and social order.

3.1 Cultural and Historical Contexts of Brothers Grimm Collection

The Brothers Grimm's collection of fairy tales emerged during a pivotal historical moment that profoundly shaped their portrayal of evil stepmothers. Jacob Grimm (1785-1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786-1859) began their scholarly work during an era of profound political upheaval and cultural transformation in German-speaking regions of Europe. The early nineteenth century witnessed the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire, the devastating impact of the Napoleonic wars, and the emergence of German nationalism as a unifying cultural force against foreign domination. Their work was deeply influenced by the German Romantic movement, which emphasised the significance of folk culture, oral traditions, and national identity in defining authentic cultural expression. As Kujundžić observes in her review of contemporary fairy tale scholarship, modern scholars recognise that "fairy tales across cultures and media as events positioned, produced, and received in specific locations and times" reflect the complex cultural contexts of their creation (Kujundžić 269). The Romantic emphasis on emotion, individualism, and organic development rather than classical formality aligned perfectly with the brothers' conviction that folk tales preserved the authentic voice of the German people.

However, the Brothers Grimm's collecting process involved extensive editorial intervention that fundamentally altered the nature of these supposedly "folk" tales. Research demonstrates:

Wilhelm Grimm had become aware that the collection had evolved into bedtime stories for children rather than as a source of entertainment for adults. As he recognised that most children can tolerate the idea of wicked stepmothers easier than that of cruel mothers, heartless biological mothers from “Hansel and Gretel”, “Snow White”, and “Mother Hulda” were transformed into stepmothers in successive editions of the tales. (Bahn and Hong 840)

Modern scholarship increasingly challenges traditional assumptions about the Grimm collection’s authenticity. Jorgensen notes in her review of Bottigheimer’s work that contemporary fairy tale scholars’ question “the conventional folkloristic wisdom about oral tradition, the transmission of fairy tales, and the role of print culture” (Jorgensen 508). Bottigheimer’s controversial research suggests that many fairy tales, particularly what she terms “rise tales” where protagonists gain wealth through magical assistance, originated not in oral folk tradition but in literary urban contexts, specifically with Venetian writer Straparola in the 1550s (509).

These editorial transformations reflected deeper anxieties about motherhood and family dynamics within German society. The systematic replacement of biological mothers with stepmothers preserved idealised notions of motherhood while acknowledging cultural fears about maternal figures. As Bahn and Hong demonstrate through their comparative analysis, in GFT [Grimm’s Fairy Tales], jealousy spurred the abuse in 12 of 15 cases (836), revealing patterns of psychological motivation that reflects broader social tensions within blended families. The socio-economic realities of nineteenth-century German life permeate these tales through themes of economic hardship, family abandonment, and remarriage strategies. High mortality rates, particularly among childbearing women, necessitated frequent remarriage arrangements that

produced complex family dynamics. Contemporary scholarship reveals that these narratives address fundamental anxieties about “material improvement,” “illusions of happiness to come,” and “social paradigms that overlap nearly perfectly with daydreams of a better life” (Jorgensen 510), concerns that transcended simple rural-urban distinctions to reflect universal human aspirations shaped by specific historical circumstances.

3.2 Violence and Punishment: Patriarchal Reinforcement Through Stepmother Narratives

In the Brothers Grimm canon, the figure of the evil stepmother consistently embodies deep-seated patriarchal anxieties concerning female competition, economic dependency, and moral transgression. These characters personify Gilbert and Gubar’s “monster” in the angel/monster duality, absorbing societal fears of women’s authority while legitimating traditional gender hierarchies. Across fourteen tales including “Snow White”, “Hansel and Gretel”, “Cinderella”, “The Juniper Tree”, “The Three Little Men in the Wood”, “The Six Swans”, “Mother Holle”, “Little Brother and Little Sister”, “One-Eye, Two-Eyes, and Three-Eyes”, “The Lambkin and the Little Fish”, “The White Bride and the Black One”, “Sweetheart Roland”, “Foundling-Bird”, and “The True Bride”, stepmother violence functions as both ritualised moral retribution and psychological catharsis. By analysing themes of mimetic rivalry, resource competition, abandonment, labour exploitation, spectacular retribution, and deceptive malice, this chapter reveals how stepmothers serve as scapegoats whose brutal punishments restore patriarchal equilibrium and reinforce the social order.

René Girard’s theory of mimetic rivalry elucidates the murderous jealousy driving stepmothers to eliminate rivals perceived as threats to their status (145). In “Snow White,” for example, the queen’s obsession with being “the fairest in the land” compels her to employ a constricting bodice that chokes, a poisoned comb that lacerates, and ultimately a fatal apple that

induces a deathlike sleep. Each attack exemplifies Walter Benjamin's concept of "mythic violence," wherein ritualised slaughter reasserts societal norms (277). Snow White's resurrection by the prince and the queen's death by dancing in red-hot iron shoes mirror Michel Foucault's disciplinary power: the public infliction of pain to deter female transgression (184). In "One-Eye, Two-Eyes, and Three-Eyes," the ordinary daughter's starvation and servitude at the hands of her stepmother reveal Slavoj Žižek's "systemic violence," the hidden oppression ingrained in social structures (12). The intervention of a magical cow and a golden apple tree serves as divine retribution, rewarding virtue and condemning envy.

Competition over inheritance and social standing intensifies stepmother cruelty and reflects early modern anxieties about property rights. In "The Six Swans," a new queen's witchcraft transforms her six stepsons into swans, compelling their sister to endure six years of silence and painstaking sewing of starwort shirts to lift the curse. Her false accusation of witchcraft underscores patriarchal suspicion of female agency and female solidarity, as Girard's mimetic violence extends to familial devotion (Girard 89). The queen's eventual punishment restores rightful lineage and reaffirms patriarchal succession. Likewise, "Cinderella" dramatises economic exclusion: after her mother's death, Cinderella is subjected to endless housework and denied attendance at the royal ball by her stepmother and stepsisters. The magical hazel tree grown from her mother's grave facilitates three nights of covert courtship, culminating in a fitting of the golden slipper and the stepsisters' mutilation by birds. This violent denouement publicly enforces inheritance laws by punishing those who obstruct legitimate heirs.

Economic precarity and abandonment emerge as central motifs when stepmothers deem stepchildren financial burdens. "Hansel and Gretel" portrays a woodcutter's wife driven by famine to abandon her children in the forest, rationalising, "We have only half a loaf left...and the children

must go; they are eating us up,” a harrowing confession of subsistence crisis (Bettelheim 159). The enchanted gingerbread cottage and the witch’s cannibalism externalise the stepmother’s latent malice, while Gretel’s cunning idea of tricking the witch into her own oven restores domestic authority through filial ingenuity. In “The Three Little Men in the Wood,” the paper dress bestowed by the stepmother epitomises deliberate impoverishment. Tasked with gathering strawberries in midwinter which is an impossible endeavour, but the stepdaughter’s kindness to three little men earns her beauty, wealth, and a royal marriage, while her selfish stepsister is cursed with ugliness and poverty, dramatising Benjamin’s “law-making violence” that sanctions patriarchal labour norms (277).



Figure 1: Grimm: “Hansel and Gretel” (Part of Jack Zipes historic fairy tale postcards)

Source: JSTOR

Note: In the large central panel, the Witch, having confined Hansel in a cage, checks to see whether he is plump enough to cook. Gretel anxiously watches in the upper right background. The narrower left panel shows the children’s parents leading them away from home into the forest. Hansel is scattering pebbles or bread crumbs he plans to use to find their way back home. In the right panel, as night falls beneath a full moon, Hansel comforts Gretel after their parents have abandoned them by a small fire in the depths of the forest.

Labour exploitation and systematic neglect are vividly depicted in “Mother Holle,” where a hard-working stepdaughter is cast down a well to the realm of Mother Holle. There, her diligent service which is shaking feathers from beds to create snowfall earns her a shower of gold upon return. Conversely, the lazy daughter’s attempt at the same task results in being coated in unremovable pitch, a permanent disfigurement. This moral economy reinstates Born-to-labour belief, yet Žižek’s “anonymous violence” suggests that socio-economic structures punish merit when it challenges hereditary privilege (7). The tale critiques favouritism by asserting that virtue, not birthright, should determine reward, though only supernatural intervention can override entrenched biases.



Figure 2: “Mother Hulda” (Part of Jack Zipes historic fairy tale postcards)

Contributor: Otto Kubel (German, 1868-1951)

Date: 1922 or earlier

Source: JSTOR

Note: The cruel stepmother forces her stepdaughter to do all of the work, including spinning while seated by the well. The widow favours her own daughter, and allows her to live in privilege and idleness (from the window of the house, she watches her stepsister hard at work).

Extreme violence as moral theatre reaches its apex in “The Juniper Tree,” where a stepmother’s jealous rage leads to filicide and cannibalism. She grinds her stepson’s bones into black pudding, tricking her husband into consumption. The boy’s sister buries his bones beneath a juniper tree, summoning a bird whose song condemns the crime, gifts gold and red shoes, and finally drops a millstone on the stepmother’s head. This supernatural vengeance embodies Lacan’s “encounter with the Other,” resolving the symbolic rupture and enabling the boy’s resurrection (234). Similar themes appear in “The Lambkin and the Little Fish,” where persecuted siblings are transformed into a lamb and a fish, only to be restored through maternal love, while the stepmother faces divine wrath. “The White Bride and the Black One” features an impostor bride stripped of royal claim and turned into a black figure, banished, while the true bride ascends to rightful status demonstrating that patriarchal retribution demands complete eradication or permanent exile of deviant women.

Deception and hidden malice permeate tales in which stepmothers employ cunning over direct violence. “Sweetheart Roland” casts the stepmother as a witch who seeks to kill her stepdaughter and seize her fortune. The couple’s shapeshifting into duck and pond, then tree and snake, underscores feminine resourcefulness triumphing over malignant craft. Their ultimate victory and the witch’s demise re-establish moral and social order. In “Foundling-Bird,” a cook’s clandestine plot to boil an abandoned child, Fundevogel, parallels stepmaternal duplicity: the heroine Lenchen’s metamorphoses into a rosebush, church, and altar protect him until the cook’s defeat affirms the power of sibling loyalty and divine guardianship. “The True Bride” further explores subversion through impossible tasks which are sorting seeds and carrying water in a sieve and memory enchantment imposed by a stepmother. The heroine’s completion of tasks with supernatural aid, coupled with her unwavering virtue, leads to the prince’s recognition and the

stepmother's downfall, reinforcing that patriarchal society rewards female perseverance but insists on the destruction of subversive maternal figures.

By weaving together themes of mimetic rivalry, resource competition, economic abandonment, labour exploitation, spectacular retribution, and deceptive malice, Brothers Grimm fairy tales channel anxieties about women's authority into narratives of stepmother violence. The grotesque punishments which are bodily torture, supernatural execution, or social exile operate as didactic spectacles validating gender hierarchies and property norms. In depicting stepmothers as embodiments of female transgression, these tales harness the cathartic power of violence to fortify the very social structures that produce their monstrous figures, ensuring that any challenge to patriarchal order is met with uncompromising severity and the restoration of communal harmony.

3.3 Psychological and Cultural Functions of Stepmother Violence

Stepmother violence in Brothers Grimm fairy tales serves important psychological purposes tied to family conflict, fear, identity, and moral growth. The violence reflects children's fears of abandonment and betrayal. For instance, in "Hansel and Gretel," the children fear being abandoned in the forest, a symbol of feeling unprotected by parents. The stepmother's role in pushing for their abandonment highlights this insecurity in family connections. In "Snow White," the stepmother's attempts to harm Snow White reveal fears of parental rejection and the worry that love can turn into jealousy. This violence shows the struggle children face between needing care from a parent and the risk that the same parent could become a threat. Psychoanalytic theory of The Brothers Grimm changed biological mothers into stepmothers to reflect a cultural discomfort with showing maternal violence directly. This creates a "scapegoat" figure that takes on family worries (Girard 89). The stepmother's violence represents rivalry and jealousy within the family, reflecting complicated issues over attention, love, and resources. For example, in "Cinderella," the

stepmother's harshness and favouritism show the rivalry between siblings and highlight feelings of neglect in blended families.



Figure 3: “Cinderella” (Part of Jack Zipes historic fairy tale postcards)

Contributor: Paul Hey

(German 1867-1952)

Date: 1926 or earlier

Source: JSTOR

Note: Exiled to the kitchen by her cruel stepmother, Cinderella's only friends are the birds she feeds.

In “The Six Swans,” the stepmother’s cruelty threatens the main characters’ status in the family and their inheritance, representing fears about losing family standing and heritage. These stories let children face such rivalries in a narrative way. Jacques Lacan’s theory of identity formation explains how stepmother figures represent “the Other” that children must compare themselves against. The stepmother’s jealousy and competition push child protagonists into what

Lacan calls “the symbolic order” (Lacan 234). In this space, they must deal with complex social relationships and power dynamics. Confronting hostility from a mother figure helps children develop independence and is crucial for their growth, even though they can develop traumatic aspects in their behaviour in the future.



Figure 4: “Little Brother and Little Sister” (Part of Jack Zipes historic fairy tale postcards)

Contributor: Paul Hey (German 1867-1952)

Date: 1926 or earlier

Source: JSTOR

Note: Little Sister sadly comforts her brother, who has been transformed into a deer.

The violence in Central European stepmother tales reflects the historical, social, and religious contexts of their time. High mortality rates in early modern Central European societies led to many remarriages, creating stepfamilies with conflicting loyalties and claims to resources. In these tales, a stepmother’s violence shows real social worries about blended families,

inheritance problems, and favouritism among mothers. The Brothers Grimm collected these stories during a time when Christian morals were strong. In this context, the evil stepmother symbolises larger sins like envy, jealousy, cruelty, and murder that are condemned by religious teachings. The stories often punish wicked stepmothers while rewarding innocent children, reflecting common Christian values of righteousness and redemption in 19th-century German-speaking areas. Traditional Central European gender roles expected women to be nurturing and supportive in the home. When a stepmother acts violently, it goes against these expectations, revealing cultural fears about female ambition, jealousy, and family disruption.

The punishment of the stepmother reinforces an ideal family order based on strict gender roles. This illustrates what Michel Foucault calls “disciplinary power,” showing how fairy tales regulate gender behaviour through oversight and normalisation (Foucault 184). The harsh punishments for stepmothers fit into a gothic tradition of using vivid violence to teach moral lessons through terror. Slavoj Žižek discusses three types of violence in these narratives. First, there is “subjective violence,” the stepmother’s direct cruelty. Then, “objective violence” reduces complex female characters to simple moral extremes. Lastly, “systemic violence” hides the patriarchal structures that create the role of the stepmother. The fourteen tales from the Brothers Grimm show that Central European stepmother stories address psychological, social, and cultural challenges. Through the use of violence (both extreme punishments and psychological abuse) the stories let audiences deal with family concerns while upholding a patriarchal social order. The frameworks of feminist criticism, psychoanalytic theory, and violence studies reveal that these children’s tales are complex tools for cultural education and social control. The stepmother is not just a villain in these stories. She represents the fears, tensions, and power struggles found in family

relationships, shaped by cultural contexts. This connection helps these tales remain relevant, sharing lessons about family, justice, and social order.

This chapter reveals how Brothers Grimm fairy tales transformed biological mothers into stepmothers to preserve maternal ideals while channelling anxieties about female authority. Through systematic editing and cultural adaptation, the Grimms created scapegoat figures whose spectacular punishments reinforced patriarchal order and provided psychological catharsis. These Central European constructions of maternal evil reflect specific historical conditions which are political fragmentation, economic instability, and high mortality while serving universal functions of moral instruction and social control. The stepmother emerges not merely as a villain but as a cultural archetype embodying communal fears, pedagogical imperatives, and patriarchal reinforcement mechanisms that continue to influence contemporary understandings of family, gender, and authority.

Chapter 4: Composition of Stepmother Figures in *Thakurmar Jhuli: Banglar Rupkatha* (Grandmother's Tales: Fairy Tales of Bengal)

This chapter studies the celebrated Bengali fairy tale collection *Thakurmar Jhuli*, assembled by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar and published in 1907, which evinces the interplay between oral practice, colonial defiance, and cultural transformation. The concept of the text emerged during the partition of Bengal in 1905, and the depiction reflects both the preservation of native narratives and the narrative reorganisation due to nationalist and colonial coercion. The purpose of this chapter is to place *Thakurmar Jhuli* within the historical context of the Bengal Renaissance and examine how South Asian portrayals of stepmother characters are deeply rooted in the conspicuous resistance against the colonial cultural hegemony. Majumdar's approach was significantly anti-colonial in order to assert the Bengali oral traditions in opposition to European cultural dominance. Contrarily, the Brothers Grimm's intention behind this fairy tale collection was to simply establish a fundamental national identity in Europe.

Therefore, this chapter highlights the influence behind the illustrations of the stepmother figures in selected *Thakurmar Jhuli* tales, including “Neelkamal aar Lalkamal” (“নীলকমল আর লালকমল”), “Shukhu aar Dukhu” (“সুখু আর দুখু”), “Shit-Basanta” (“শীত-বসন্ত”), and “Shat Bhai Champa” (“সাত ভাই চম্পা”) through the exploration of historical setting, the conversion from oral tales to written narratives, and the patriarchal dominance within its portrayals. The historical setting focuses on both the progressions and the conversions of maternal iniquity within the South Asian setting. The incorporation of psychoanalytical and cultural perspectives inaugurates the representation of social insecurities surrounding women's familial and moral responsibilities, as well as the initiation of cosmic justice through these characters, which differs significantly from Central European cultures.

4.1 *Thakurmar Jhuli: Banglar Rupkatha: An Approach from Oral Folklore*

“Dakhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s *Thakurmar Jhuli: Banglar Rupkatha*, a collection of children’s oral folk tales, published in 1907, was an attempt at the process of restoration of the cultural identity of the Bengalis” (Paul 157). The collection of these Bengali tales is an incorporation of distinctive historical and cultural backgrounds which is responsible for the portrayals of evil stepmother figures. “Following the ideals of ‘Swadeshi’, Mitra Majumdar introduced the collection as an indigenous alternative to the children’s stories produced by the West” (153). This collection represents a combination of multifaceted aspects including the desire to preserve the oral culture, the resistance against the colonial dominance, and the noteworthy possibilities of the Bengali literary renaissance. *Thakurmar Jhuli* was a brilliant creation and publication during the Indian independence movement, especially in the time of 1905 partition of Bengal. The strong nationalist spirit emerged during this event.

Debosmita Paul extends her discussion saying “Bengalis put forth the idea that an entire race was resisting the forced partition of the community. This image of a united Bengal was a fabrication propagated by the Swadeshis as a united Bengal did not ever exist” (156). Majumdar’s collection supports this idea of Bengal’s togetherness to oppose the colonial cultural ascendancy. She further restates Rabindranath Tagore’s introductory work by mentioning:

Thakurmar Jhuli and other works of literature and art written during the Swadeshi period aimed to achieve this principle. In the foreword of the anthology - the “Bhumika,” Rabindranath Tagore calls it the best ‘indigenous’ product ever produced and lauded the manner in which the folk flavour of the fables is retained. He writes that at a time when the young are forgetting their rituals and culture under the influence of the Western teachings, *Thakurmar Jhuli* came as a source of relief. (Paul 158)

“He (Dakhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar) managed to retain the characteristic diction, flavour and simplicity to a great extent which is required for narrating a Rupkatha” (Tagore 22). Tagore further says “Can there be anything more appropriately Swadeshi than *Thakurmar Jhuli*?” (21). “This book came as a Swadeshi alternative to the children’s stories which were produced by the West and were flooding the Indian market” (Paul 158). This discussion reflects how *Thakurmar Jhuli* puts emphasis on the preservation of culture.

Although the Brothers Grimm were determined to create a perpetual national identity in Europe, Majumdar tried to confront the colonial power. “It amalgamated within itself the European concept of Romantic Revival⁴ and anti-colonial nationalism by recreating Bangla folk tales for children of Bengal” (164). The intention was utilising the inspiration from the west to create a Bengali traditional folk culture that can work against the British. Furthermore, Majumdar’s journey in collecting the stories is completely different from the Brothers Grimm’s approach. For this reason, he was able to focus on multiple cultural differences as well as the unified version of Bengal. Paul says:

Thakurmar Jhuli anthologises the folk tales from the eastern Bengal region, specifically those from the Mymensingh region. The writer is reported to have visited the region and collected the stories directly from old womenfolk of the region. As has been discussed, its creation was a result of the Renewal of the interest of the nationalists, who were mostly urban upper-class Bengalis, towards the cultural heritage of the region. Such enthusiasm seems to be a natural process when one studies the stages of growth of national consciousness during an anti-colonial struggle. (Paul 157)

⁴ The revival of interest in folk tales comes from European Romanticism which is an artistic, intellectual and literary movement from the late 18th to mid-19th century.

4.2 Narrative Structures of Stepmother Figures in Bengali Tales

The Bengali folk collection *Thakurmar Jhuli*, compiled by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder, weaves together cultural ethics and supernatural symbolism, offering more than entertainment. These tales dramatise familial conflict, maternal rivalry, and the confrontation between good and evil while embedding social hierarchies and deeply rooted beliefs in karma and dharma. Stories such as “Neelkamal ar Lalkamal,” “Shukhu ar Dukhu,” “Shit Basanta,” and “Shat Bhai Champa” illuminate jealousy, loyalty, endurance, and deception, all within a cultural framework that reflects Bengal’s social concerns with kinship, power, and morality. Unlike European fairy tales, where wicked figures often meet violent ends, Bengali stories emphasise resolution through Renewal, transformation, or cosmic intervention. The stepmother in these tales is not simply a villain but the embodiment of anxieties surrounding maternal authority, favouritism, and social fracture. Their eventual exposure and punishment highlight a distinctly Bengali moral ecosystem, where spiritual justice and cosmic harmony, rather than state or human punishment, restore broken bonds.

Stepmothers in *Thakurmar Jhuli* embody the dangerous fusion of jealousy and destructive maternal power, as seen in “Neelkamal ar Lalkamal,” where the *rakshasi*-queen desires to devour Kusum’s flesh, her “tongue turning red” in anticipation. These grotesque depictions dramatise envy and insecurity within royal households, where favouritism or exclusion could decide inheritance and familial survival. In “Shit Basanta,” a favoured queen enacts violence against rivals through banishment and poisoning, proving René Girard’s theory of mimetic rivalry, where envy generates cycles of conflict that destroy domestic peace (145). Thus, domestic space becomes fraught with fear, expanding maternal jealousy into a cosmic drama of survival, where the mother becomes both protector and predator. These figures destabilise kinship ideals, suggesting that

maternal benevolence cannot always be trusted, and violence emerges precisely from within the structure designed for nurture.

Beyond violence, the stepmother is marked by discrimination and systemic neglect, as visible in “Sukhu and Dukhu,” where affection and resources are unequally distributed: Sukhu receives love and comfort while Dukhu bears humiliation and excessive chore burdens. The home becomes a stage for Slavoj Žižek’s systemic violence, where oppression operates not through explicit aggression but through normalised inequality (Žižek 2). This hierarchy mirrors broader Bengali concerns about caste and class divisions, showing how domestic cruelty is inseparable from structural inequities that shape identity. Foucault’s disciplinary power is reflected in this favouritism as household routines who eats, who works, and who receives affection minutely police family relations (Foucault 184). Lacan’s concept of failed identification clarifies how children caught in this hierarchy cannot stabilise their familial belonging, showing that kinship bonds are constructed, not innate (235). Unlike European traditions that emphasise physical punishment, these Bengali tales reveal the slow violence of neglect. Walter Benjamin’s idea of “mythic violence” resonates here: systematic injustice sustains hidden control, only to be broken later by “divine violence,” the force that disrupts oppression with redemptive transformation (278).

Many maternal villains in these tales cloak cruelty in manipulation and deception, maintaining appearances of normalcy while secretly plotting harm. “Neelkamal ar Lalkamal” conceals the *rakshasi*-stepmother’s predation until betrayal reveals her monstrous identity. In “Shat Bhai Champa,” elder queens conspire against the youngest queen through lies and false stories, while “Shit Basanta” presents poisoning and banishment under the guise of routine actions. Such duplicity corresponds to Foucault’s disciplinary power, where control masquerades as ordinary social practice (184). Gilbert and Gubar’s theory further explains how the stepmother

appears angelic to the outside world while hiding her monstrous intent. This deceit exemplifies Žižek's "objective violence," where the manipulation of language and appearances reshapes social reality itself (6). Court intrigues and domestic pretences mirror historical Bengal's survival politics, where diplomacy and hidden malice operated in tandem. René Girard's scapegoat mechanism clarifies why these deceptions must eventually surface: hidden violence demands revelation to heal communal ruptures (89). Importantly, in Bengali storytelling, disclosure rarely occurs through human investigation but through divine or magical revelation, reaffirming cultural reliance on cosmic truths instead of legal proof.

Despite their cunning, Bengali stepmothers inevitably face exposure and downfall, but justice unfolds differently than in European narratives of physical vengeance. Their punishment is tied to spiritual transformation and karmic balance. In "Neelkamal ar Lalkamal," a magical staff destroys the stepmother, resonating with Benjamin's "divine violence," which breaks cycles of domination without reproducing oppression (278). In "Sukhu and Dukhu," the stepmother's own favoured daughter falls into misfortune while the wronged Dukhu ascends through fortune, a karmic reversal rooted in Hindu and Buddhist understandings of causation. Similarly, in "Shat Bhai Champa," exposure leads to disgrace and displacement rather than overt execution, while in "Shit Basanta," the favoured queen faces total collapse when her own children suffer from the very traps she set for rivals. These reversals dramatise Lacan's the return of harsh truth that shatters constructed façades (232). The downfall is not only punishment but transformation: wrongdoing destabilises households temporarily, but resolution restores moral equilibrium.

Ultimately, the narrative treatment of stepmothers in *Thakurmar Jhuli* reflects a cultural investment in spiritual redemption and cosmic justice rather than bloody retribution. Cruelty, jealousy, and manipulation serve as catalysts for divine revelation, karmic reversal, and restoration

of dharma. These tales reinterpret maternal villainy as both destructive and revealing: stepmothers expose the fragility of kinship structures and patriarchal hierarchies while embodying anxieties around women's power in polygynous households. Their exposure, disgrace, or death serves not only to end their terror but also to restore unity, balance, and social continuity through transformation. By situating evil within a cosmic moral framework, Bengali folklore emphasises that villainy is temporary while the ultimate truths of resilience, justice, and Renewal endure. Unlike European fairy tales, which close with violent punishments, *Thakurmar Jhuli* offers endings that stress spiritual growth, karmic justice, and the survival of goodness. In doing so, these tales teach that cruelty and deception may prevail temporarily within families, but the final force is not vengeance but balance the return of dharma through divine intervention and collective healing.

4.3 Psychoanalytic and Cultural Functions of Stepmother Violence

Stepmother violence in fairy tales, especially in Bengali *Thakurmar Jhuli* stories, serves several purposes related to childhood fears, family issues, and social concerns. The violence from stepmothers represents not just physical cruelty but also deeper emotions and psychological struggles. These stories help children understand complex family dynamics. First, stepmother violence highlights children's fears of rejection or betrayal, as the stepmother often appears as a harmful figure who threatens the safety and love that a mother should provide. This helps children express complicated feelings towards their mothers and family authority. By depicting the stepmother as a source of harm, these stories help children confront their fears of losing love, feeling neglected, or experiencing abuse in their families. Jacques Lacan's theory explains how stepmother figures represent "failed identification." This shows the anxiety children feel about forming their own identities when they have to be away from parental authority. Also, this violence

influences children's psychological growth. The stepmother's mistreatment pushes young characters to become resilient, resourceful, and assertive.

In stories like “Neelkamal aar Lalkamal”, children rely on strong bonds with siblings and magical resources to survive. These elements symbolise psychological defences that help children cope with trauma. The conflict with the stepmother reflects the child's struggle for individuality and self-identity in a threatening environment. Lacan describes this as entering “the symbolic order,” where children learn to navigate complex social relationships and power dynamics. Also, stepmother violence reveals power struggles within families, highlighting competition, jealousy, and favouritism common in blended or extended families. In these stories, the stepmother symbolises not just personal wrongdoing but also social systems that create conflict among children and women asking for love, status, or survival. Slavoj Žižek refers to this as “systemic violence,” showing how social structures can create conflict rather than individual malice. These themes help children understand family inequality and unfairness. Often, the stories conclude with a moral lesson that restores order. René Girard describes this as “cathartic resolution,” using the scapegoat mechanism to channel collective anxieties into manageable storylines.

In Bengali folk tales, especially in the *Thakurmar Jhuli* collection, stepmothers often display violent behaviour. This reflects the local culture, where such violence influences social values, family structures, and meanings that are unique to the region and its history. The way stepmother violence is portrayed in these stories affects how people understand it and how it impacts characters emotionally. In *Thakurmar Jhuli*, the stepmother is usually part of a traditional family setup, such as when a king has multiple queens. This situation creates family rivalries over who will inherit the throne. The violent actions of the stepmother highlight specific cultural concerns about family lineage and inheritance, as well as the legitimacy of mothers.

The conflict between biological mothers and stepmothers illustrates the struggle between different maternal lines for power and resources, a common issue in extended families and royal households. This reflects what Michel Foucault calls “disciplinary power” within family hierarchies. In this cultural setting, stepmothers often represent chaos in the family, threatening its natural order and stability. Their cruelty may be personal or political, aimed at controlling or eliminating rivals to secure their own position. The portrayal of stepmothers can vary in other cultures, which might focus more on domestic or psychological issues. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify this difference in how cultures construct the “angel/monster” duality. Therefore, Bengali storytelling, particularly in *Thakurmar Jhuli*, includes local folklore, religious symbols, and mythical characters that emphasise the theme of stepmother violence. The stepmother often symbolises dark forces, such as demons, showcasing a struggle between good and evil that is central to Bengali beliefs. This connects to local ideas about purity, impurity, karma, and divine justice. These symbols convey moral lessons through vivid and supernatural images, where the stepmother stands for moral wrongdoing and the child protagonist embodies innocence and virtue, waiting for redemption. These familiar cultural symbols help the audience relate to the violence in a way that aligns with their shared values.

The uniqueness of these stories is evident in how they conclude with moral and cosmic restoration that aligns with Bengali ideals. Victimised children, often of royal or noble birth, typically overcome their challenges with divine or magical assistance that restores harmony in the family and kingdom, demonstrating what Walter Benjamin describes as “divine violence” that transforms rather than simply punishes. This ending emphasises community values like justice, fairness, and making amends. While the violence may seem harsh, it is portrayed as a necessary challenge that leads to peace. This reinforces a hopeful belief in the triumph of good over evil and

the restoration of social and family balance, echoing René Girard's notion of "sacred violence" for community healing. Examining the cultural aspects of stepmother violence in *Thakurmar Jhuli* stories reveals a close connection to Bengali family structures, traditions, gender roles, and moral beliefs. This connection shapes the portrayal of violence and its psychological impact, demonstrating what Slavoj Žižek calls the cultural specificity of violence, which behaves differently across various social systems.

The stepmother narratives in *Thakurmar Jhuli* illustrate the layered cultural and historical realities of colonial Bengal. Compiled within a nationalist project that aimed to preserve indigenous traditions in the face of European cultural domination, the collection rooted its storytelling firmly in oral practices, maternal voices, and village humanism. Unlike Central European tales, Bengali fairy tales emphasised divine justice, cosmic balance, and transformation over physical vengeance, reflecting the influence of Tantric, Vaishnava, Buddhist, and Sufi traditions that informed local thought. Psychoanalytically, the stepmother represents both failed maternal identification and systemic cultural violence, while socially, she embodies anxieties about patriarchal hierarchies and joint-family rivalries. Yet her downfall never signals gratuitous brutality; instead, it reinforces Bengali values of Renewal, dharma, and karmic balance. By embedding maternal villainy within cycles of cosmic justice rather than punishment alone, *Thakurmar Jhuli* marks a culturally distinct way of rendering family violence one where destructive forces contain within them the seeds of restoration and spiritual redemption.

Chapter 5: A Narrative Juxtaposition

The creation of a nefarious stepmother has a profound and alarming impact across several universal folklore traditions. This character appears in the classic tales of the Brothers Grimm and continues to spread its influence in several distinct cultural settings, especially in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's Bengali collection *Thakurmar Jhuli*. The impacts of the character are so intense that they generate universal childhood fears of abandonment from their actual mother. Children often get anxious about losing their mothers because they are aware of the consequences they will face if the caring figure somehow vanishes from their lives. This notion is created from the problematic portrayal of stepmother figures in several folktales across multiple cultures. These characters are often created by men in order to establish a stereotypical notion of women's agency. They fear that their symbolic power will not have any significant meaning if somehow their projected prejudice gets cancelled. The intention behind this illustration is to simply flaunt the patriarchal superiority among women.

Besides, they want to demean women through the demonstration because of the deep-rooted social order. They create cultural anxieties towards women possessing familial authority, which will eventually create chaos in the social order. It is because they are successful in establishing the notion that women will compete with others and create violence, as they are not good at keeping a good relationship with their own gender. They dismiss the idea of emphasising friendship among women. People easily mistrust and misinterpret the healthy relationship among women because they believe that it will eventually bring social instability. The persistent use of this figure in fairy tales raises a comparative analysis not only of the narrative pattern but also of the permanent cultural, psychological, and symbolic frameworks that help to progress the characters' actions and fates. It is evident that both the Central European culture and South Asian

culture use the stepmother character as a trope to portray shared themes of maternal rivalry with other women, especially with a child, sibling rivalry, which is the consequence of the stepmother's wrongdoings; and the psychological formation of a child due to the surroundings.

However, significant divergences can be identified through the portrayal of stepmother characters by focusing on how the violence is illustrated and resolved at the end. Finally, the effects of these actions on children's upbringing. Both the children who are present in the chaotic environment and experience the harsh or favourable treatment from their parental figures in the fairy tales, and the children who witness the experience by reading the tales, can be considered while examining the impact of the fairy tales' specific portrayal. Necessarily, the psychological functions of these fairy tales play a significant role in shaping the child listeners' viewpoints as they experience their growth in reading the tales. Although these tales are created for the child audience, the problematic portrayal that can be identified by the adults inflicts a greater consequence on the children without them realising it.

In Central Europe, followers of Christian morality and the emerging bourgeois family structures were more drawn to filling stories with moral binaries of good and evil, and they chose to connect the evil stepmother figure with this sharp binary that supports the idea of maternal villainy with vivid physical punishments. Contrarily, Bengali tales are more influenced by the Hindu and Buddhist ideologies and spiritualities, and their mindset is shaped by several years of colonial struggles. For this reason, the cruelty is portrayed through recurring boundaries, and they emphasised redemption and cosmic justice rather than punitive punishments. Therefore, this chapter focuses on three major juxtapositions present in both the Western and Eastern parts of the folktale tradition. It begins with the thematic exploration that includes the pattern of jealousy, rivalry, and maternal uncertainty that creates a connection between these two distinct traditions. It

is because all of these are created because of the patriarchal influence on spreading everything based on their superior phenomena.

Next, it explores the divergent approaches of inflicting violence and the decided and deserved resolution at the end. It is because the West tends to focus more on vivid punishments rather than leaving it to nature. They follow the pattern of punishing their offenders by themselves, mostly without waiting for something to magically happen, punishing their wrongdoers, and bringing them the justice they deserve. In contrast, the East focuses more on the spiritual resolution. They rarely take matters into their hands. They are more believers than haters. They believe in nature's fair judgement, and even if they do not get to see the resolution before their eyes, they still believe that it will somehow happen in the afterlife.

Finally, this chapter considers the consequences of these fairy tales on children's upbringing. It explores their significant roles in managing fear, aggression, and identity during childhood. It is because children spend most of their primary moments with their parents. Unfortunately, if a child loses his/her mother, they will have to rely on the alternative option they will receive from their father or based on the symbolic need created by society. Either the children will be traumatised by the portrayal, or they will learn how to deal with the complicated situations. Overall, this chapter finds out how the character, despite being present in different scenarios, projects similar themes and at the same time creates differences in the resolution and the overall impact. It examines how different cultural settings possess a nearly similar thought process when it comes to the topic of women, but solve the issue with separate social imaginations.

5.1 Universal Anxieties: Shared Themes Across Traditions

Despite being a part of distinct cultural settings and historical backgrounds, both the Brothers Grimm and *Thakurmar Jhuli* collections provide strikingly similar issues present in

family life. The centre of these narratives is filled with the theme of maternal jealousy, deep envy, competition against the stepchild, which works as a symbol of childhood insecurities towards their possessions and being overly competitive in their future, and sometimes a feeling of impotency in their mind. They become fragile in expressing their emotions and achievements because they fear it will bring more chaos to the relationship with the mother, who does not behave like their own. They fear being conditioned to receive love and also start to hate their achievements, as without them, they will receive the love they deserve. This jealousy and envy usually start over the concerns of beauty, inheritance, or affection.

Eventually, the cruelty starts due to the need to eliminate the child in order to satisfy their problematic desires and receive recognition, feeling threatened. In “Snow White”, the stepmother gets jealous over Snow White’s beauty, which cannot be snatched easily, as the mother is comparatively old and Snow White is young and prosperous. The evil queen takes it personally, and it gives birth to murderous intent. It is concerning and sad that the relationship, which is supposed to be based on nurturing, has transformed into a fatal competition. This cruel behaviour of the stepmother indicates the culturally predetermined thoughts towards female rivalry. They believe that women are more concerned with superficial elements that will not last for long, such as youth, beauty, and money. They become fierce and competitive in gaining those, creating significant chaos in society.

Similarly, in “The Juniper Tree”, the stepmother’s jealousy towards the stepson receiving extra care from his father makes the mother jealous and creates the need to eliminate him from the family. Her way of eliminating the son is so vivid that the hatred seems so personal, which indicates the rivalry for attention. Also, in “Neelkamal aar Lalkamal”, the *rakshasi* queen’s desire to devour the flesh of Kusum indicates her desire to fulfill her anger. During the process, she ends

up hurting her own children. She is so disturbed by the fact that her own son tries to save Kusum that it infuriates her. Such acts depict the cruelty in personal taken hatred that they forget to think about the true judgement of an incident. This depiction is so extreme that they portray how an evil stepmother can act while dealing with her anxieties, as the consequences will harm their own possessions as well. They suggest that the maternal antagonism is inherent in their hearts, as it can be revealed through harming their own children as well.

So, the image of nourishment that is inherent in a mother's behaviours is being exchanged with the idea of threat. Such vivid depictions can be identified under the lens of Gilbert and Gubar's angel/monster dichotomy. This notion delivers the thoughts of women who get rebellious with their actions, which ends up being the monstrous figures that will only create destruction rather than bring peace and harmony. At the same time, in "One-Eye, Two-Eyes, and Three-Eyes", the stepmother gets jealous of the normal appearance of Two-Eyes. Because of her envy, she ends up neglecting and abusing Two-Eyes. In "Little Brother and Little Sister", the stepmother gets jealous of rival children as they will receive more inheritance while being alive. She goes to the extent of following witchcraft and violence to remove the children from the family.

Also, in "The White Bride and the Black One", the stepmother gets jealous of the familial position of the stepdaughter. She does not think of the happiness of the children and Proceeds to replace the true bride with her own daughter. Here, she ignores the fact that her actions can lead to harsh criticism for her own daughter, and she could have received neglect in her future, but the fame blinds the mother so much that she does not acknowledge those issues and attempts to change the fate of her daughters. She is being competitive for marital and familial position. Similarly, in "Sweetheart Roland", the stepmother proceeds to harm the protagonist of the story in order to protect her own daughter's status. The same thing happens in "Foundling Bird" and in "The True

Bride,” where the stepmother attempts to harm and replace the positions of the rightful young women to create a separate identity for themselves and their children.

Sibling rivalry arises from the actions of the stepmother. They create boundaries and differences among the children to get what they desire. In all of the above stories, the children could have had a healthy sibling relationship with each other, but instead, they project hatred, which corresponds with the activities of their mother. In “Cinderella”, the two daughters of the stepmother get unnecessarily competitive with Cinderella, resulting in their harsh endings. Also, in “Mother Holle”, the stepmother projects cruelty on the stepdaughter in front of her own daughter. She promotes this harsh behaviour, which allows the daughter to incorporate those behaviours in herself. These mothers favour cruelty over harmony; their intention is to rewrite the inheritance practice and family hierarchies violently.

This rivalry can be seen between the co-wives as well. In “Saat Bhat Champa”, the rival queens coordinately attempt to undermine the youngest queen by burying her newborn children. They could not tolerate the fact that the king is more favourable towards the youngest queen, and it will eventually grow after the birth of her children. They are illuminating the precariousness of kinship bonds under polygynous rules. These mirrors of rivalries can reflect the broader understanding of the political struggle of respective social structures, which are showcased through their traditions of folktales. Then economic pressure creates more instability in the home. Both collections reflect on the vivid manifestations of poverty, scarcity, and survival instincts. It shows how the economic failure of a nation can affect the individual family structure.

In “Hansel and Gretel”, the stepmother decides to abandon them, ignoring the fact that they can be in serious danger onwards. However, it is evident that economic struggles make their situations so hard that they are aware of the fact of Hansel and Gretel’s death in the woods, but

still they choose to do this. This indicates parental failure and material desperation. In Bengali “Shukhu aar Dukhu”, the stepmother’s treatment of the children focuses on the economic struggles of the family. It is expected that if their situation were a bit better, the mother could have embraced the stepdaughter. In “Shit-Basanta”, the stepmother abandons the child to save their family from economic destruction. All of this is an indication of the political and economic deficiency of a nation that can influence the harsh treatment of parental figures towards their children.

Finally, these failures of a nation or a family target the female characters as scapegoats to fulfill their instabilities. They try to divert the focus from their instabilities with the symbolic hatred towards the maternal figure. Their creation of these aspects leads to the universal fear of maternal jealousy, economic hardship, sibling conflict, and patriarchal and national blame. They are projecting the entire responsibilities on the women, as they can also interfere to negotiate with the blame, as the stepmothers were deliberately brought in by the fathers. So, it is the duty of the fathers to reach their expectations. Instead, they put the entire blame on the women to be chaos-free in their lives.

5.2 Divergent Approaches to Violence and Resolution

The previous section extensively talks about the similarities in the portrayed themes in both collections. However, the main differences between Central European and South Asian Fairy tales become evident through their projection of stage violence and, later, how the violence is resolved. Brothers Grimm focuses on the explicit elements while punishing the sinners, while *Thakurmar Jhuli* deals with violence spiritually. They believe in transformation, redemption, and cosmic justice. In “Snow White”, the stepmother is forced to dance in red-hot iron shoes until her death, depicting the horrifying portrayal of the Brothers Grimm collection. The punishment is aligned with Christian morality that supports the idea of punishing the external malice, and having a moral

lesson for future sinners to purify the internal malice of others. Similarly, in “Hansel and Gretel”, the witch is burned alive in her own oven, indicating the deserved justice. It indicates that if the children’s freedom is expected, then the maternal malice needs to be punished brutally. They will gain both their freedom and justice.

In “The Juniper Tree”, the stepson is cooked by her stepmother, and she lets the father unknowingly eat his own son. Later, the stepmother dies by the throwing of a millstone by the resurrected boy as a bird. These portrayals deliver the aspects of cannibalism, vivid descriptions of the cruelty of the stepmothers, but do not forget to return the same fates to the mothers as well. This aligns with Michel Foucault’s idea of “disciplinary power. The society tries to discipline the outcast to bring the lost patriarchal order back to society. It works as an educational spectacle for others so that they can enforce normative behaviour. The purpose is not only to punish the stepmother but also to warn the other female figures to forget those rebellious thoughts because their punishment can be the next spectacle. They are indicating a moral boundary for women that cannot be crossed.

Thakurmar Jhuli, on the other hand, tries to balance between the good and bad. They do not do anything to get revenge because it will give birth to another means of revenge. The victims are aware of their mistreatment, but they still choose to leave it to the spiritual entity. The spiritual redemption can punish the sinners, and it will eventually bring order to the world. In “Neelkamal aar lalkamal”, the rakhsasi queen’s defeat comes from magical interference rather than bodily punishments. But their pure thoughts cannot leave the idea of using women as a scapegoat. They still portray those women as demonic characters to create fears regarding their agency. Similarly, in “Shit-Basanta”, the stepmother loses her children in the ocean and dies crying for her bad luck.

Nature automatically takes its revenge on the sinners. They emphasise the balance rather than the vengeance. Their punishment suggests transformation and mercy over retribution.

To sum up, in Grimm tales, the stepmother needs to suffer the consequences all alone for the social order to resume. Here, the community's harmony is restored through the elimination of the singular evil character. It is more like an individual blame. But *Thakurmar Jhuli* supports collective Renewal. It is not fixed in a single family; rather, the elimination brings justice and harmony for the whole kingdom. The difference is also seen in the narrative tone of the two collections. The Grimm tales offer more vivid descriptions, such as burning, mutilation, and dismemberment, to invoke Gothic fear. Whereas the Bengali collection invokes this gothic fear by portraying the stepmothers as demoness characters. One invokes fear in the appearance of the characters, and the other invokes fear through the actions.

5.3 Psychological and Developmental Functions of Stepmother Tales

Fairy tales are critically important in the development of children. Such vicious acts of the stepmothers can affect the children, who will either internalise or externalise the fragmented or fracturing familial bonds. Lacan's theory of failed identification explains that when a child faces the competition with the maternal figure, they get insecure with themselves and their belongings. They fail to communicate and express their emotions. Later, it affects their physical ability as well. They get indecisive with their identity and social roles. Some forget to show empathy towards others, as their childhood was full of receiving harsh treatment. In "Hansel and Gretel", they encounter parental rejection in the situation of extreme hardship, resulting in the fear of abandonment in the long run. In "Shukhu aar Dukhu", Dukhu copes with familial inequalities through separate treatment.

Finally, these stories function as vehicles for cultural transmission, teaching not only morality but cosmology. Grimm tales embed Christian dichotomies of sin and redemption, offering children clarity about right and wrong. *Thakurmar Jhuli* embodies Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic cosmologies, emphasising karma, dharma, and cyclical time, guiding children toward understanding cruelty as part of moral balance rather than absolute evil. As such, fairy tales are more than entertainment; they inculcate foundational cultural values shaping children's ethical understandings and psychological resilience. In sum, both the Brothers Grimm and Bengali traditions utilise the figure of the wicked stepmother as a scaffold on which children can safely explore and manage complex emotional realities: loss, aggression, identity, and social roles. Though differing in narrative resolution and cultural context, these stories perform parallel psychological functions essential for childhood development.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The study of evil stepmother characters in the Brothers Grimm and *Thakurmar Jhuli* fairy tales shows a clear connection between common psychological themes and specific cultural storytelling methods. In both Central European and Eastern stories, the stepmother figure reflects fears and anxieties such as jealousy, sibling rivalry, economic competition, abandonment, and the complex nature of motherhood. However, the way these fears are expressed, the forms of violence used, and the moral lessons learnt differ significantly, highlighting different cultural beliefs, social systems, and moral values. In the Brothers Grimm tales, stepmothers often display extreme cruelty, jealousy, and selfishness. They aim to harm their stepchildren such as in “Snow White” and “Hansel and Gretel” by using powerful violence. This brutal violence often leads to shocking punishments, like the red-hot iron shoes or the heavy millstone, which serves as a form of “moralistic violence.” This concept shows how terror is used to teach young audiences about acceptable behaviour for women.

Michel Foucault’s ideas on power help explain how these stories control behaviour, teaching girls to fear the consequences of ambition, rivalry, and crossing societal boundaries. Walter Benjamin’s idea of “law-making violence” suggests that these harsh acts restore male authority by removing deviance in one dramatic act. The Bengali *Thakurmar Jhuli* tradition shows stepmother cruelty in more complex ways, such as favouritism, emotional neglect, magical tricks, and hidden manipulation. In these tales, stepmothers use subtle but harmful methods: they might banish children into dangerous forests, poison them with everyday objects, or use spells disguised as love. Unlike other stories, the ending doesn’t focus on harsh punishments.

Instead, the tension leads to “divine violence,” a concept by Benjamin that restores moral balance through sacred help rather than strict punishment. Supernatural curses are removed, debts are settled, and justice is restored, stressing spiritual Renewal instead of physical harm. In “Saat Bhai Champa”, for example, siblings turn into flowers and later become human again, reflecting themes of death and rebirth tied to Hindu and Buddhist beliefs about karma and dharma, emphasising moral growth over punishment. Despite these differences, stepmother figures share common roles. René Girard’s scapegoat theory explains how both cultures project social problems onto one villain, the stepmother. This figure takes on community worries like money issues, inheritance conflicts, and family threats allowing people to transform their anger toward her to restore group unity.

On the other hand, psychoanalytic theories reveal how evil stepmothers represent the “bad mother” image. They help children express mixed feelings of love and resentment, dependence and betrayal. Lacan’s idea of the mirror stage and the notion of the Other further explain how facing the “monstrous” stepmother helps children form their identities by pushing them to define themselves against a negative maternal figure. The moral lessons in these stories vary based on cultural values. In the Brothers Grimm tales, the harsh treatment of characters reflects early modern European worries about property rights, family lineage, and controlling women’s characteristics. Stepmothers are often killed off to avoid challenges to male inheritance and to uphold strict gender roles.

In contrast, *Thakurmar Jhuli* presents a more healing approach shaped by South Asian values that emphasise community, spirituality, and resistance to colonialism. Here, the focus is on divine justice and moral change, viewing conflict as a chance for spiritual growth rather than just a reason for harsh punishment. This difference highlights that violence in children’s literature is

influenced by each society's history, religion, and social context. Another key difference is how gender roles are portrayed. In Grimm's stories, stepmothers who challenge maternal expectations face severe consequences, serving as warnings against female ambition and disruption of the home. This illustrates Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's idea of the "angel/monster" dichotomy: the nurturing mother contrasts sharply with the evil stepmother, whose elimination supports male dominance.

In *Thakurmar Jhuli*, however, readers find a wider range of female characters. Along with villainous queens, there are heroines whose intelligence, sacrifice, and purity help them earn redemption and approval. This variety suggests that, in the Bengali tradition, women have more room to express their agency. This is influenced by a mix of religious traditions such as Hindu, Buddhist, and Sufi that acknowledge both the creative and destructive sides of feminine power. The effects of different storytelling styles on children vary. In Grimm's tales, the harsh treatment and clear morals offer a strong release for children. They can act out aggressive feelings and learn that good prevails through revenge. However, the violence in these stories can also promote strict views on justice.

In contrast, *Thakurmar Jhuli* focuses on empathy, forgiveness, and personal growth. This approach shows children that they can overcome cruelty through kindness and community support. It helps them develop emotional intelligence and moral understanding. Bettelheim's views on fairy tales as tools for emotional growth mirror these two approaches: one confronts evil directly, while the other seeks healing and balance. Economically, the stepmother character reflects community concerns about resources and inheritance. Grimm's stories highlight rural hardship, showing how stepmothers may abandon children during tough times as a relatable action. In "Hansel and Gretel," the stepmother's fear of children as financial burdens leads to her downfall, which restores

family wealth. On the other hand, *Thakurmar Jhuli* handles economic issues differently. Here, even when power and resources are at stake, stories resolve through karma rather than punishment. This approach values fairness over just material gain, suggesting that communities can address economic worries through spiritual means. The stepmother character is relevant because she represents important human issues like rivalry, mixed feelings about mothers, competition for resources, and the search for identity.

However, different cultures handle violence and its resolution in varied ways. Grimm's tales focus on punishment, while *Thakurmar Jhuli* emphasises healing, each teaching children valuable lessons and reinforcing community values. Future research could compare these stories with other traditions, such as Native American, African, and East Asian to explore how the stepmother archetype evolves and addresses changing social anxieties. Researchers might also look at how modern retellings and adaptations, shaped by global media, combine punitive and restorative elements, reflecting mixed cultural views. In summary, stepmother figures from Western and Eastern fairy tales show both universal human fears and specific cultural responses. Through feminist critiques, psychoanalysis, and violence theory, we see how fairy-tale violence mirrors societal norms and teaches moral lessons. Whether through harsh punishment or magical change, these stories help us confront serious family conflicts while suggesting ways to achieve justice either through punishment or forgiveness that continue to resonate across generations and cultures.

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