

A Flower Called *Fyonli*: Women, Nature, and the Sacred

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Abstract

This paper presents an ecofeminist reading of *Fyonli*, a folktale from the Central Himalayas, in comparison with verses from the *Devi Mahatmyam*, a key Shakta scripture. Through the story of Fyonli, a young village woman who withers in a wealthy household and is reborn as a flower in her native soil, the paper explores the deep-rooted bond between women, nature, and the sacred in indigenous cosmologies. It argues that Fyonli embodies the same regenerative force celebrated in goddess traditions as *Shakti*, and her transformation echoes the cyclical resilience of the divine feminine. Drawing on folk tradition, Sanskrit scripture, and ecological thought, the paper situates this narrative within the broader framework of eco-spirituality, climate justice, and biocultural resilience. It highlights how local oral traditions preserve sacred ecological knowledge, which is often marginalised in mainstream discourse. The comparison reveals that folk and scriptural traditions, though distinct in form, converge in affirming women as life-givers, nature-keepers, and moral anchors of their ecosystems.

Keywords: Folktale, Fyonli, Uttarakhand, Ecofeminism, Devi Mahatmyam

The Indian state of Uttarakhand rises from the foothills of Haridwar to the snows of Nanda Devi. Between cedar ridges and glacier-fed torrents lie terrace farms, shepherd trails, and villages where stories travel faster than cell signals. Women here, *Pahadi* women, tend cattle, thresh millet, collect water, and still find time to sing epics at the hearth. Their songs record their numerous emotions and



praise deities who share their moods with the monsoon (Negi, 2011).

Ecofeminist thinkers, such as Vandana Shiva (1988) and Bina Agarwal (1992), have long pointed out that in many rural and agrarian communities, especially in South Asia, women's relationship with nature extends beyond mere survival; it's a form of lived knowledge. Every time a woman collects firewood, gathers fodder, or plants seeds, she's not just doing a chore; she's engaging with the land in a deeply intuitive and sustainable way. Vandana Shiva emphasises that women play a vital role in sustaining life, particularly within subsistence economies, where their contributions closely align with the rhythms and cycles of nature. Rather than dominating or exploiting nature, women engage with it through attentiveness, care, and adaptability. (Shiva, 1993, p. 45)

In the hills of Uttarakhand, this connection between women and nature isn't just practical, it's sacred. The land itself speaks through folktales and songs: the mountains are mothers, the rivers are sisters, and the forests are the first homes we ever knew. These stories don't just describe the world; they shape how people live in it. When women

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are displaced or hurt, the land grieves too. To cut down a forest is to silence a memory; to uproot a woman is to unravel a community. As Shiva and Agarwal remind us, ecological and gender injustice often go hand in hand (Shiva, 1988; Agarwal, 1992).

This idea isn't new. Ancient Indian texts have long spoken of Earth in feminine, nurturing terms. The Atharva Veda gives us a moving declaration:

माता भूमिः पुत्रोऽहं पृथिव्याः।

Mātā bhūmih putro'ham pṛthivyāḥ

Earth is my mother, and I am her son. (Atharva Veda 12.1.12)

Here, the Earth isn't just soil and stone; she's a mother to whom we owe gratitude, protection, and love. Similarly, the Rig Veda honours the divine feminine through the figure of Vishnu Shakti:

या देवी विष्णुशक्तिः।

Yā Devī Viṣṇuśaktih

The goddess is the power of Vishnu himself. (Rig Veda 10.125)

This Shakti, the cosmic feminine force, runs through both nature and the female body. It collapses the artificial divide between woman and nature, reminding us that both are sacred and essential. So, when forests are felled, rivers dammed, or women displaced, it's not just a social issue; it's a spiritual and ecological crisis. Therefore, it becomes imperative to revive and honour our oral traditions that connect us with the surroundings intrinsically. Our folklore is replete with such narratives. When we listen to Uttarakhand's folktales and rituals through this lens, they become more than cultural heritage; they are living archives of ecological memory and resistance. They remind us of ways of being that are rooted in respect, balance, and reciprocity. And perhaps more than ever, they ask us to remember what we are forgetting.

In contrast, many Western religious and philosophical traditions, particularly in their classical and medieval expressions, historically positioned nature as a resource to be dominated or subdued. For example, in Genesis 1:28 of the Hebrew Bible, humans are instructed to "subdue it(earth): and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth"(King James Version, 3) a framing that has often been interpreted as a justification for extractive and hierarchical approaches to the environment. This anthropocentric and patriarchal lens diverges sharply from the sacred reciprocity seen in Indic traditions, where nature is seen not as an object but as a living relative or goddess.

In this intersection of gender and geography stands the tale of *Fyonli*, a narrative transmitted in Kumaoni and Garhwali dialects and enacted symbolically every March when the Fyonli flower (*Reinwardtia indica*) paints hillsides yellow. Her story is a microcosm of what happens when economic migration, or development projects, sever people, especially women, from their ancestral ecologies. Though this tale exists in many versions, one element remains constant: a woman dies, only to return as a flower. Her transformation embodies the cyclical nature of *Shakti*, a force that cannot be silenced or diminished.

The Tale of Fyonli: Rootedness and Rupture

Fyonli's story is told by grandmothers beside hearths and remembered in the blooming of a yellow flower each spring. There are many versions available of the tale, but the most popular one is that once a prince, while hunting in the forest, finds her. Enchanted by her grace, he marries her and brings her to his palace in the plains.

But the palace is no paradise. Its walls are too thick, the air too still. The winds no longer sing, and the trees that once whispered stories are gone. The silence presses in, heavy, unnatural. Day by day, Fyonli fades. She doesn't long for pearls; she aches for the gentle clang of cowbells. She doesn't care for servants; she yearns for the warmth of her mother's hands. Like a leaf drying without rain, she withers quietly.

Before her final breath, she whispers to the King: Take her home and scatter her ashes where the mountains speak. The prince hears her plea. He carries her back to the soil that knew her footsteps, to the hills that held her songs. There, she is laid to rest. And it is said that when the yellow flower blooms each year, Fyonli returns.

A Feminine Ecology: Phool Dei and Living Pedagogy

Each 'Chaitra Sankranti' (midMarch), children, chiefly girls, wake before dawn, feet numb with dew, to collect *Fyonli*, rhododendron (*buransh*), and wild jasmine. They knock on every threshold, sprinkle petals, and rice at doorsteps, and sing:

फूलदेई, छम्मा देई, दैणी द्वार, भर भकार, य देई में हो, खुशी अपार

Fool dei chamma dei, deni dwar bhar bhakar, ye dei me ho Khushi apar

May the flowers on the door bring abundance and auspiciousness. May the door of the house be forgiving and protect everyone, may there be a full store of food in everyone's house. (Pant, 2024)

Older women teach which flowers to pluck without uprooting, turning the rite into a lesson in sustainable

harvesting. Anthropologists call this 'ritualised resource management' (Bates & Mukherjee, 2015). Through Phool Dei, Fyonli is not lamented but celebrated, and by this sorrow has metamorphosed into stewardship.

Devi Mahatmyam and Fyonli: Shared Ecofeminist Ethos

At first glance, the *Devi Mahatmyam*, a Sanskrit religious scripture composed between the 5th and 8th centuries CE, and a rural folktale like *Fyonli* from the Central Himalayas seem worlds apart in genre and language. One is liturgical, recited during Navratri rituals across India; the other is oral, passed from grandmothers to children in fireside retellings. Yet, both arise from a common cultural matrix that sacralises the feminine and ties it intimately to nature, balance, and cosmic order.

i. The Feminine as Life-Giver and Sustainer

Both texts portray women not as passive recipients of divinity but as manifestations of Shakti, the dynamic, living energy of the universe. In the *Devi Mahatmyam*, the goddess is addressed repeatedly as the force within every being:

या देवी सर्वभूतेषु शक्तिरूपेण संस्थिता। नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमो नमः॥

To the goddess who resides in all beings as power, I bow.
(Devi Mahatmyam, 5.16)

Fyonli, as a character, represents this inner strength. Despite her material poverty, she lives a spiritually rich life amid rivers and mountains. Her affinity with nature embodies the same life-affirming force.

ii. Disruption and Restoration of Balance

In both narratives, imbalance arises when this feminine principle is neglected or dishonoured. In the *Devi Mahatmyam*, demons like Mahishasura disrupt *ṛta* (cosmic order), and the goddess must intervene. In *Fyonli*, her forced uprooting from her native ecology leads to emotional and physical decline, paralleling the breakdown of harmony when Shakti is severed from her natural context.

iii. Death as Transformation, Not End

The *Devi Mahatmyam* celebrates the goddess's many forms, each emerging in response to a unique crisis.

या देवी सर्वभूतेषु वृद्धिरूपेण संस्थिता। नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमो नमः॥

To the goddess who dwells in all beings as growth. (Devi Mahatmyam, 5. 20)

This verse reflects the deeper philosophy behind Fyonli's transformation: regeneration through nature is the feminine's eternal cycle. Fyonli's rebirth through nature symbolises not only the resilience of Shakti but also her message: to uproot women from their native ecological contexts is to disrupt life's balance. As with Goddess Durga, who assumes many forms to restore cosmic order, Fyonli's reincarnation in the form of the *Fyonli* flower is a reminder that nature, like the feminine, reclaims itself. Her final transformation into a blooming yellow flower, a return to the soil, is a symbolic *pratyavartan* (divine return). This act affirms the *Devi Mahatmyam*'s emphasis on regeneration and divine resilience.

iv. Local vs. Scriptural – Two Languages of Shakti

While the *Devi Mahatmyam* is part of the Sanskrit textual canon, *Fyonli* is rooted in *lok parampara* (folk tradition). Yet both perform the same cultural function; they assert the primacy of the feminine in maintaining balance between human life and nature. This reading of Fyonli through the lens of *Devi Mahatmyam* reinforces the notion that folk narratives are not merely cultural artefacts but living texts, bearing messages of balance, sustainability, and divine interdependence.

Conclusion: Let the Flower Bloom

Fyonli's body returned to soil, but her soul rose in saffron petals. She didn't leave a monument. She left a flower. And in that flower lives a question: *Are we listening to the Earth? Are we listening to the women who speak its language?* Her story is not from the past. It is the present. It is the girl who misses her village after being married off. It is the forest cut down for a highway. It is the grandmother who knows which root heals. It is the land calling us back, not for ownership, but for relationship. The goddess lives in every being that nurtures, heals, and protects. Just like Fyonli did.

शरणागतदीनार्त परतिराण परायणे।
सर्वस्यार्तहिरे देवि नारायणी नमोऽस्तु ते॥

Śaraṇāgatadīnārta Paritrāṇa Parāyaṇe,
Sarvasyārtihare Devi Nārāyaṇī Namō'stu Te

To the Goddess who is refuge for the suffering and the humble, who removes all distress, I offer my deepest bows. (Devi Mahatmyam, 11. 24). Quiet, wild, blooming, eternal, Fyonli is that goddess, and her flower still urges us to bloom in kinship with Earth.

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