

Baba Yaga: The Mysterious Wise Woman in Slavic Folklore

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ABSTRACT

The Wise Woman is a mysterious archetype that appears in folklore and fairy tales. Often labelled as witches, these Wise Women become targets of political and religious idealists. But folklore embodies them with multiple personalities as they appear in versatile forms and names in similar narratives. Baba Yaga is one such Wise Woman archetype who appears in different roles in Slavic folklore narratives. She is Witch, Wise Woman, Healer, Heroine, Villain and was even venerated as a Goddess in certain communities. She is not just a sorceress who lives in a magic cottage; she becomes an artefact of historical data and a representative of folk tradition. This paper analyses the significance of Baba Yaga in her multiple roles in folklore examining her Shadow side and tropes in narratives.

Keywords: *Slavic folklore, Baba Yaga, Witch, Wise Woman, Archetype*

Folklore abounds with the Wise Woman archetype varying in personality from the simple Cinderella's fairy godmother to the complex enchantress Morgan Le Fay from Arthurian legends. They appear under many names and professions as healers, witches, fairy godmothers, sorceresses and guides. These archetypes either assist the hero/heroine in their quest or destroy them, playing the part of the villain. Their assistance/destruction depends on the personalities of the heroes/heroines. They are complex with multiple traits and talents. They are often misunderstood and avoided by society. They are nonconformists, rebels, warriors, prophets and sages. The other archetypes in a folk tale - like the King, the Hero, the Child, the Warrior - need the help of the Wise Woman. This Wise Woman serves as the backbone of the folk narrative structure, yet they are often neglected and labelled simply as witches.

The Slavs, referred to as "Schlaveni" [1] by Byzantine writers, thrived around 1500 BC in the region of modern day Russia, Ukraine and Poland. They belonged to the category of people termed barbarians by the Romans. They were nomadic and travelled far and wide reaching the Czech Republic and Germanic borders. Writing and recording among the Slavs were introduced only after Christianization. A warring tribe, the Slavs wrote stories about hardship, the fickle nature of rulers, the stability of nature and the omnipresence of magic. "Steeped in dark myth and wild legends, Slavic folk tales paint a world of witchcraft and sorcery, a land of superstition. They

were more than fairy stories; they were a way of life.” [2] This paper researches into the features and representations of the mysterious Baba Yaga, the dark Wise Woman of Slavic folklore.

Among the vast mythical list of Slavic characters, the “vampir” ‘vampire’ [3] is the only popular one today. The modern vampire is totally different from the Slavic counterpart though - only those who were entirely evil or committed suicide morphed into vampirs after death. They are not seductive and beautiful like the postmodern *Twilight* vampires, nor do they get into wars with werewolves. They wear their ripped and worm-eaten grave clothes and tear off heads in their hunger for fresh blood. And they transform into butterflies and moths! Some of the other lesser known characters are “Vukodlak” ‘werewolf’, “Alkonost” ‘the goddess of weather’, “Rusalka” ‘nymphs’, “Domovoy” ‘domestic gnomes’, “Lesnik” ‘the god of the forest’, “Usud” ‘fate’, “Zmaj” ‘the benign dragon’ and “Todorats” ‘centaurs’ [4].

Baba Yaga is a Wise Woman/Witch archetype who appears in almost every Slavic/Russian folktale. She lives in a wooden house that constantly rotates on chicken legs. Her fence post is made of human bones with skulls that shine through their eyes in the night. Often, the last post is bare to hold the skull of the hero or the heroine. The keyhole of her gate is made of sharp teeth. Invisible servants obey her every command. Pairs of hands clean and dust the house. She commands the Day, the Noon and the Night. When she is out, Baba Yaga flies in a mortar pounding the path with a pestle and sweeping away her tracks with a broom. She has a flock of black geese circling the skies watching for children who she could eat.

Morphing into evil queens and enchantresses, Baba Yaga also appears as the Queens of Copper, Silver and Gold kingdoms in the folk stories of Alexandr Afanas’ev. The Encyclopedia Britannica calls her “an ogress who steals, cooks and eats children” [5]. But that is hardly accurate. Her name “baba” refers to an old woman; a grandma, an older married woman who belonged to the peasant hierarchy. Her name also means “midwife” in Old Russian. “Jaga” or “Yaga” is from the Slavic “Jadwiga” which means a legendary witch, dryad or fury [6]. It also means nightmare or disease in Polish. In short, she is a peasant woman who is wise beyond her years and capable of either bringing destruction or averting it. She can heal or bring disease depending upon the seeker’s mind. No other witch or wise woman is credited with such a distinction.

Baba Yaga makes her first appearance in Mikhail V. Lomonosov’s *Russian Grammar* (1755) with a list of Slavic deities. When Alexandr Afanas’ev compiled the folk tales of Russia from various regional sources, he attributed a number of peculiarities to her. Firstly, there is ‘a’ Baba Yaga in many stories distinct from ‘the’ Baba Yaga. She is an archetype of a hideous witch in a forest or on the edge of the seashore. Once the hero or heroine, henceforward called Seeker in this paper, enters the cabin, a Baba Yaga is immediately spotted lying inside “corner to corner, lips on the railing, nose stuck in the ceiling.” Fourthly, she asks the Seeker the following question: “Are you doing a deed or fleeing a deed?” [7] while she recognises the Russian smell. Lastly, she is often called ‘bony leg’ or ‘iron teeth’ performing manly tasks that stood out amidst the patriarchal society. “She

is at once bestial in her hunt for prey and divine in her supernatural abilities of flight, shape-shifting, and magical spells.” [6]

Understanding the Seeker of Slavic folklore leads to understanding the antagonist. Baba Yaga is actually the Shadow of the Seeker in Slavic folklore. This Shadow is the lifelong suppression of desires, feelings and instincts which lies hidden deep in the Seeker’s unconscious. The more the light, the more the darkness. If the Seeker is powerful, intelligent and wise, his/her Shadow is worse than the average man/woman’s. Roman Jakobson observes that all the heroes in Slavic folklore are named Ivan Tsarevich or Prince Ivan; after Ivan the Terrible: “It illustrates how the Russian popular memory evaluated this tsar and his attitudes to the common people and to gentlefolk.” [8] It is possible that Ivan the Terrible forced the “skomorokhi” ‘Russian minstrel entertainers’ [9] to sing to him and they made him the hero to escape execution. The Tsar in all these tales is either giver-of-peace referring to Alexander III or vendor-of-wine referring to Nicholas II. Hence, these tales are actually microhistories narrated orally for centuries. And Baba Yaga becomes the Shadow, the demon, the beast of all these tyrants who are also powerful rulers.

Vladimir Propp has analysed the Russian folktale and presented various tropes for the structure of these narratives. Based on these, Baba Yaga’s roles in Slavic folklore are as follows:

- i) The Victim - Baba Yaga and her daughters/sisters end up being cooked in the stove prepared for the Seeker. They are cheated and betrayed by the Seeker. “Baba Yaga and the Runt” pictures Baba Yaga killing her own daughters out of trickery.
- ii) The Villain - this is based on the Law of Prohibition. Young children are usually warned by parents not to venture out at night; they disobey and are snatched by Baba Yaga. The Seeker fails to perform certain difficult tasks set by Baba Yaga and she eats him/her. If the Seeker is rude and or dishonest, Baba Yaga eats him/her. Prince Ivan, in the tale “Mar’ia Morevna,” is asked by Baba Yaga to herd her *bogatyrs* mares [guardian beasts of immense strength] who run like the wind. When Ivan does the job assisted by birds and other beasts, he steals her mangy foal and rides away to rescue his wife from Koschei the Deathless, an immortal necromancer. But Baba Yaga pursues him and dies trying to cross a magic bridge.
- iii) The Challenger - Baba Yaga identifies the persona of the Seeker and gives him/her a task to do. This is often a superhuman task for which the Seeker receives assistance either from Baba Yaga’s familiars because he/she is kind to them or from a magic doll supposedly made by another Wise Woman. Once the task is successfully completed, Baba Yaga rewards the Seeker. The most popular Cinderella-like tale “Vasilisa the Beautiful” presents Baba Yaga rewarding the Seeker with a magic skull that glows in the dark after she proves herself by completing the impossible tasks. The magic skull burns Vasilisa’s cruel stepmother and stepsisters while the Seeker is married to a tsar.

iv) The Guide - Baba Yaga guides the Seeker to another Baba Yaga or Wise Woman who can help him/her. The perfect example for this is the tale “Finist the Bright Falcon.” Three Baba Yagas assist the Seeker in finding her bewitched husband.

v) The Deceiver - this is the paradox of the Victim role. Baba Yaga tricks victims in the guise of a frail old lady or a beautiful princess. It must be noted here that she does not trick innocent or honourable people. The Seeker’s brothers/sisters who lack the Seeker’s honour are deceived and eaten. The tale “Ivanushka” shows little Ivan being tricked by Baba Yaga who imitates his mother’s voice and later abducts him.

vi) The Supernatural Lover - the innocent but noble Seeker finds himself in love with a beautiful maiden who turns into a bird or an animal. He steals her skin when she changes back and gets married to her. But he is too curious and hurts her feelings forcing her to fly/run away to a place “way beyond thrice nine more lands”[7]. The Seeker goes out on a superhuman adventure and is reconciled to his lover only after proving himself. On the way, he is even assisted by other Baba Yagas. The Supernatural Lover is much like the Norse god Loki, the Trickster. She encourages transformation in the Seeker. This is found in tales like “The Three Kingdoms” and “Go I Don’t Know Where, Bring I Don’t Know What.” Baba Yagas in these tales are quite different from the regular ones. In “The Three Kingdoms” Baba Yagas are the beautiful queens of Copper, Silver and Gold kingdoms. In “Go I Don’t Know Where, Bring I Don’t Know What,” the Baba Yaga is a young Wise Woman much like Elena the Beautiful. She has a magic book, young demons to obey her command and she outwits the regular Baba Yaga who also appears as a Villain type in this tale.

Folklore abounds with women who are gifted healers and often, these healers receive the same dignity and respect reserved for the chieftain of the tribe. Their eccentricity and intelligence got them into danger and victimised them. Witchcraft became a suitable crime to punish these sorceresses. Karimov et al. is of the opinion: “They have much in common with sorcerers: in the same way they die hard, suffering from terrible convulsions, sticking their tongue out of their mouths, unusually long and horse-like”[10]. Traditional female folk-healers were called witches by men of the same profession to pull them back into the privacy of the home and prevent them from occupying public space

“They transformed folk healers from individuals attempting to serve their community into witches - agents of Satan — who used their knowledge and abilities to harm. Female folk healers were targeted as witches because their practice pulled them into a public setting, which challenged the expectation that they stay in the private realm of the home.” [11]

Therefore, Baba Yagas are all loners, devil-worshippers, shunned by the society because of their prudence and intelligence. Secondly, all Baba Yagas have either two or three beautiful daughters or sisters. All of the sisters/daughters are considered Baba Yagas - sharing the Wise Woman archetype. Psychological anthropology makes Baba Yaga a “Ethno-psychiatrist”[12]; a woman who uses cultural artefacts to treat mental illnesses, thereby deviating from Western methods. This is why Baba Yaga is always depicted with brooms, mortars and

pestles - household implements of traditional folk healers. She is a shaman, a witch-doctor, a hoodoo priestess or a universal cultural icon that forms an integral part of folk tradition.

Yamauba is a Japanese mountain witch archetype much similar to Baba Yaga. Also called “onibaba” ‘mountain witch’ [13], *yamauba* is a yokai, an oni-woman who craves human flesh, especially that of children. When young women accused of crimes become exiles, they live in forests and morph into these “mountain witches” [14]. Though Yamauba is cannibalistic in nature, she too helps Seekers who are honourable and brave. In the popular take ‘Hanayo no hime’ (“The Blossom Princess”), a *yamauba* rescues the Seeker from her *yokai* husband and gives her a map that leads to treasures. Noriko Reider is of the opinion that rising Confucianism from China introduced patriarchy and feudalism writing off traditional healers as yokai; “One of the major reasons for the mixture of *yamauba*, *oni*, and *oni*-women lies in the *yamauba*’s *oni*-roots, but the influence of patriarchy, in particular, the Confucian-style patriarchy imported from China, is certainly perceivable” [15].

Sibelan Forrester is of the opinion that Baba Yaga may have been “a pagan goddess.” Unlike the beautiful and seductive witches demonized by Western myths, Baba Yaga has ghastly features and masculine traits. Forrester describes her thus

A Baba Yaga is inscrutable and so powerful that she does not owe allegiance to the Devil or God or even to her storytellers. In fact, she opposes all Judeo-Christian and Muslim deities and beliefs. She is her own woman, a parthenogenetic mother, and she decides on a case-by-case basis whether she will help or kill the people who come to her hut that rotates on chicken legs. [7]

Joshua J. Mark claims that Baba Yaga is the Slavic version of the goddess Persephone. Her chthonic skills relate her to gnomes and beings of the Earth. She also achieves similarities with Hecate, the Greek goddess of the Crossroads, also called the Crone. Her broom made of silver birch equates her to the Celtic goddess Brigid. Silver birch symbolises new beginnings and Brigid is the goddess of the hearth. She appears as Queen of the Earth along with Koschei the Deathless of the Element Air, the Sea King of the Element Water and the Firebird of the Element Fire. As an elemental deity, Baba Yaga always has her home in the forest or on the seashore, representing the borders of the Earth. This is similar to the legendary witch Circe living in the Far West in Homer’s *Odyssey*.

The Welsh anthology *Mabinogion* shows enchantress Rhiannon also accompanied by birds just like Baba Yaga. These birds can supposedly bring the dead back to life. Hence the comparison with Persephone. Rhiannon is another Wise-Woman and a Healer framed for her alleged sins and cut down to size. As to the question ‘Who is she?’ She is a powerful being who brings transformations - the tales take a sudden turn towards the climax, the Seeker is changed forever and the village is enlightened. She also brings transformation to the reader and the listener. Her story inspires a passion for freedom, the beauty of nature and the undying will power of man. Taisia Kitaiskaia has used Baba Yaga in the archetype of the Seeress in her *Ask Baba Yaga: Otherworldly Advice for Everyday Troubles*. These lines are from her preface titled ‘Baba & Me’

Indifferent and immortal, Baba offers no comforting pats on the back. But she can extend - with her gnarled, clawed hand - a glowing skull lantern. If you keep your nerve, that eerie light might guide you through. Be well, and beware. [16]

Baba Yaga is not for the soft-hearted angel-and-unicorn-loving kawaii people. She checks the hearts of the readers for resilience. She sets upon superhuman tasks on the readers' psyche. Should they pass, she offers paths of guidance. She is a symbol of otherworldly fear and horror. In the popular 2014 film *John Wick*, actor Keanu Reeves is called 'Baba Yaga' because he strikes fear into the hearts of the very best assassins. Baba Yaga answers only to the toughest, strongest iron-willed souls that have dragged their lives across the quagmire of suffering and misery. And she changes people for good, forever.

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