



Representation Of Women In Bezbaruah's *Burhi Aai Sadhu*: Some Selected Folktales

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Abstract: This paper attempts to make an analysis on how women are depicted on Assamese folktales *Burhi Aai Sadhu* with reference to the Assamese tales like 'Tula Teja', 'Champawati', 'Silonir Jiyek' (The Kite's Daughter) and *Tejimola*. It aims to examine the concept of *lagi*(beloved) and *alagi*(not favourite) which is a result of male gaze. It also makes an analysis the concept of *Aai*(mother) and *Mahi Aai*(stepmother). Female objectification can be seen in 'Silonir Jiyek(The Kite's Daughter) where the Saudagar pleased by Tora's beauty decides to marry her after having seven wives already. This gives birth to a woman's hatred towards another woman that can be her husband's wife or her stepdaughter. This paper will also analyze how women suffer both physically and emotionally. It will also show women turning out to be their worst enemies in the midst of patriarchy. *Tejimola* is a clear indication of this hatred in a woman towards her stepdaughter. It can be observed that in Assamese folktales gender conflict is rare and instead it can be noticed that women themselves become rivalries.

Keywords: Gaze, polygamy, objectification, patriarchy, rivalry, mother, stepmother, subaltern.

Laxminath Bezbaruah is the first collector of Assamese folktales. His first compilation of tale is *Burhi Aai Sadhu* (The Grandmother's Tales) that was published in 1911. The collection consists of thirty folktales. Bezbaruah collected the folktales from different people of Assam and compiled in 1911. A prominent folklorist of Assam Birendranath Datta says, "Bezbaruah's *Buri Air Sadhu* (1911) deserves special attention not only because it represents the earliest attempt to collect and publish Assamese folktales but also because of the driving spirit behind it, viz. the emerging Assamese nationalistic fervour. The short preface of the book is strikingly knowledgeable in that it refers to the role of folklore in the nationalistic upsurge in Europe and also to the contributions made in the field of folklore by such personalities as Herder, the brother Grimm, and Bopp."(Datta2005.25). According to P.Goswami-"The Assamese for an oral tale is *Sadhukatha*, usually derived from the Sanskrit *Sadhu*, a merchant, a *katha*, a tale meaning thereby that the *Sadhukatha* is a tale told by a wandering merchant."

Women are thought to be seen to be 'other', having a secondary position in society. Any gendered culture teaches people how to behave in the society depending upon the concept of masculinity and femininity. The socialization of woman renders her a woman with certain apparently inherent qualities like weakness, feeble-mindedness, patience and so on. Notions of morality or sensibility are used by males to argue that women need to be confined to the home (being weak), protected (being vulnerable), and controlled (being naive, unpredictable and unstable). Feminists suggest that inequality of sexes doesn't have a biological basis or an origin, it originates in the cultural construction of gender difference. Gendering is a practice of power, where masculinity is always associated with authority. This paper attempts to make an analysis on the representation of women in the world of Assamese folktales as compiled by Laxminath Bazbaruah in his collection entitled '*Burhi Aair Sadhu*' in 1911.

In the folktales, it is quite evidently shown that in the patriarchal system polygamy and bigamy was prevalent among the male members of the Assamese society. In most of the Assamese folktales, there is the mention of 'Lagi'(beloved) and 'Alagi'(not favourite) wives. This gets reflected in the tales like *Tula Teja* and *Champawati*. In *Tula Teja*, the first wife is Alagi and the second wife is Lagi. Lagi dominates the Alagi and her children Teja and Kanai. Lagi lives a comfortable life while the children of Alagi are deprived of it. They have to take care of the cows in the field. Alagi accepts her role as another wife of her husband and does not protest against Lagi's misbehaviour towards her and her children. She even remains silent to the inequality between her and Lagi's position in her husband's life. According to Foucault the discourses produce particular subject to control. People who lack power to determine their lives and futures are said to lack agency. They are called subalterns. Every social formation has its own subalterns. Here, Alagi and her children become the subalterns. The subaltern is a term Spivak borrowed from the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to signify the oppressed class. Spivak's well known argument is that the subaltern cannot speak for him/herself because the very structure of colonial power prevents the speaking. For the colonized woman speaking is even more impossible because both colonialism and patriarchy ensure that she keeps quiet. Therefore, the subaltern cannot represent herself.

Like *Tula Teja*, in the tale *Champawati* also the inequality among women gets reflected. A rich man had two wives. Here, the first wife is Lagi and the second wife is Alagi. The Lagi wife gets the husband support and tells him to make a small hut for his Alagi wife and her daughter Champawati. Lagi also had a daughter. The husband listens to his Lagi wife and does everything she tells him to do against his Alagi wife and their daughter Champawati. He even agrees to marry Champawati to a snake as he promises to the snake and instigated to do so by his Lagi wife. He even plots with his Lagi wife to kill his Alagi wife and Champawati, their daughter. Generally, Alagi wives are portrayed as naive and caring wives- mothers. They remain silent and submissive to every injustice they face in their family.

In both the tales, *Tula Teja* and *Champawati*, the father's role towards his children often depends on his relationship with their mother. In *Tula Teja*, the father was indifferent towards the wellbeing of Teja and Kanai because their mother was his Alagi wife i.e. not his favourite. He even did not search well after his Alagi wife went missing suddenly. On the otherhand, he provides all comfort and cares for his Lagi wife (favourite) and her daughter Tula. This can be seen in *Champawati* also. The husband prefers his Lagi wife and listens to her everytime while making his Lagi wife and Champawati suffer. Thus, it can be seen that the concept of *Lagi* and *Alagi* is a result of male gaze.

The folktales showcases a patriarchal society in where the woman is assigned particular roles- as wife, mother, daughter all of which make her dependent upon the male, and reduce her identity to her relationship with men. The ideology of gender is such that the woman is trained, right from childhood to believe that motherhood and wifely roles are the goals to aspire. In the very beginning of the tale *The Kite's daughter*, the partiality against woman in the society is noticed. The Potter blames his wife for unable to produce a male child. He even warns her that if once again he gets a girl child he will sell her to the Nagas.

In the folktales, the concept of *Aai* (mother) symbolizes the universal motherhood. It is seen that women in the society enjoy a more prestigious position in society than any other role that they play. Such ideology of glorifying mothers is well represented in the proverbs in Assamese language. For instance- "Aair saman hobo kon? Nair saman bobo kon?"

Here the mother is compared with a river. It is the universal truth that river is eternal, its flow never stops. Likewise, a mother is beyond comparison, her love and affection never dry. This proverb obviously glorifies the mother. The folktales show the mother figure as a caring and always thinking for the wellbeing of their children whether she is a human being or an animal or bird. In *Tula Teja*, even after getting transformed into a tortoise (Alagi) through magic done by Lagi, Alagi takes care of her hungry children by providing food to them. Similarly, *The Kite* is a depiction of a mother with utmost care to a human child. She was a protection to her throughout her life. She helps her in every difficult situation she faces after her marriage because of

her merchant husband's wives. The wives killed The Kite after they came to know that she was her savior who always helped her.

In this tale The Kite's Daughter is portrayed as a naïve and helpless and her character is the socially accepted ideal feminine character. In *Tula Teja* and *Champawati*, the Lagi wives daughters are puppets in the hands of their own mother. The daughters had to pay the cost of their mother's jealousy and greed nature as they both lost their lives. In *Tula Teja*, Tula was sent by her mother instead of Teja to the King's palace. The king came to know of Teja's stepmother's evil nature, punishes her own daughter to death to make justice. In *Champawati* also the Lagi wife daughter died due to her mother's jealousy and greed. As Champawati was filled with gold after marriage with a snake, Lagi decides to get a snake groom for her daughter too and told her husband to find it. But the snake the husband brought ate her on their wedding night. Thus, she lost her life. In both the tales the mothers are in one way responsible for their daughter's untimely death.

The concept of beauty is also seen to vary from time to time. Every society has its own notions or ideas regarding the concept of beauty and if a woman does not fall under those criteria of the society she belongs to, she is not regarded as a perfect woman. The notions regarding beauty and the female body is a social construct. The folktales also depict beauty as a pre-requirement for a woman for marriage. In the tale *The Kite's Daughter* the merchant decides to marry the Kite's Daughter falling for her beauty. The merchant was married to seven wives already. In *Tula Teja*, the king decides to marry Teja seeing her beauty.

The motif of the Co-wives (Sathani in Assamese) occupies a significant place in Burhi Aair Sadhu. In *The Kite's Daughter* the merchant six wives created problems in the Kite's Daughter's life. They wanted to lower her position in their husband's eyes. They tried several plans like making her to cook, to clean the cow shed and weaving husband's cloth. Beside every time she was saved by her Kite mother. The co-wives finally came to know about it, they killed the Kite making her orphan. When the merchant husband was out for work, they manipulated the Kite's daughter to go out with them and sold her to a trader in lieu of ornaments. She was found wailing on the river bank by her husband. The merchant commanded his senior wives to walk on a thread stretched across a pit full of spikes. Six of them fell in, while one escaped as she was not with them in their evil deeds. The tale *Tula Teja* also shows co-wife atrocities. In the beginning of the story, the Lagi wife makes Alagi and her children lives miserable. In a similar way, the king's wife in advice of a maid wanted to prove Teja as ill-fated in front of her husband. The king's wife became insecure after getting the news of her husband bringing his new bride in the palace. She feared of becoming the 'other' after arrival of Teja.

Regarding the gender conflict in the Assamese tales Kishore Bhattacharjee opined that in Assamese folktales the cases of gender conflict are rare, instead there is noticed rivalries among women, most commonly among step mother-daughter relation and co- wife relations (Bhattacharjee, 1999: 31-37).

Tejimola is a popular Assamese folktale. It has continued to stir its readers over the years and evoke different interpretations. This tale is a clear indication of a woman's extreme hatred towards her stepdaughter. Tejimola was dear and loved by her father but she was hated by her stepmother. Tejimola's father was a merchant and had to travel for months. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the stepmother plots to get rid of Tejimola forever. Tejimola portrays the suffering of a beautiful young girl who is lonely. Tejimola survives and gets into a cycle of several non-human rebirths and thus succeeds in making her father aware of his second wife atrocities. Tejimola returns to human form and her stepmother is thrown out of home.

The Subaltern here does speak, raises her voices and terrifies the wrongdoer to frustration. Tejimola is throughout portrayed to be innocent. She doesn't strike back even when she is assaulted and torture is inflicted till death. It is nature carrying her metamorphosed in a beautiful bountiful form that narrates her story in a lyrical note. An eco-critical perspective of the Tejimola story would highlight nature as the active

and supreme agent in seeking justice for Tejimola. Nature cannot be countered and defeated, the voice echoed till justice is done.

Tejimola's father is a representation of the patriarchal authority that travels for work to come back with wealth and a secure future for his daughter in the form of a groom. It is in the hands of him the fate of two women are decided. He transforms Tejimola into human form and throws his wife out of home.

Tejimola's stepmother is a reflection of woman turning out to be woman's worst enemies. The stepmother's evil actions are accounted for as her evil intentions. She is the doer of the actions of which Tejimola is the receiver. If we analyse the story, from one point Tejimola's stepmother can also be seen as a victim in the patriarchal order. She is a childless woman. Her position in her husband's eyes is just a caretaker to his daughter. She is left to look after her and a child who is not her own. She is a prisoner of her own house and her frustrations are therefore emitted onto Tejimola. The stepmother gets aware that she can use power over Tejimola during her husband's absence secretly shapes the stepmother's actions and motives. The stepmother's character is mysterious too as there is no explanation of what makes her so cruel towards Tejimola, or whether she has been victim herself gives an opportunity transforms into a victimizer over one who is weaker than her. Individual when subjected to abuse "as survivors struggle to adopt alternative relationship roles, and they often move out of victim roles and into abuser roles." (Cloitre, Cohen and Koenan 51). Tejimola's suffering and her resurrection each time 'goads' the victimizer to 'greater excess' (Prado 145). As Foucault says, "where there is power there is resistance, and yet...this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault 94-95).

The relation between these three characters can be viewed by using Karpman drama triangle. It is model of social interaction suggested by Stephen Karpman. Karpman uses triangles to map conflicted or drama intense models relationship transactions. The Karpman Drama Triangle models connection between personal responsibility and powers in conflicts, and the destructive and shifting roles people play. He defined three roles in the conflict: Persecutor, Rescuer (the one up positions) and Victim (one down position). Karpman placed these three roles on an inverted triangle and referred to them as inverted triangle and referred to them as being the three aspects or faces of drama. In the folktale, Tejimola, the three characters would loosely fall in the following categories-Victim (Tejimola), Persecutor (stepmother) and Rescuer (father).

Conclusion

An analysis of the folktales reveals certain women stereotype such as caring, nursing, cooking, weaving, and rearing and so on. This expresses the expectation of the society from a woman and it leads to the construction of an ideal womanhood. It also reveals that it is the male person whether husband or father comes in rescue for the woman in troubles. Power is in the hand of patriarchy where the evil women are punished and the virtuous women are saved or rescued from their evil shackles. Thus, it is seen that gender roles in Assamese folktales are basically generated by values of patriarchy, and the morals these tales convey strengthen the patriarchal world order.

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