

# **PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE ASSAMESE FOLKTALES: FROM THE COLLECTION OF TALES 'BURHI AAIR SADHU'**

## **Abstract**

Folklore is the traditional beliefs, stories, and customs of a group of people. Folktale is a folklore genre that typically consists of a story passed down from generation to generations orally. The Assamese Folktales doesn't only describe about the women's sufferings, competition among women but it also describes the women's kindness, courage and cleverness. In most of the Folktales from Assam women are portrayed as women's biggest foe. In most the stories Assamese Folktales, older jealous wives of a male leads are portrayed as the villain, trying to harm the young, innocent, beautiful new wife. The husband is never questioned for marrying a young women and treating his women simply as objects of possession. In the story 'Tejimola', the step mother is portrayed as an extremely cruel villain to torture and kill her step daughter Tejimola, propelled jealousy and ill will. In the story 'Kata Jao Nak, Kharani di Dhak', it describes about a young wife, princess who has exceptional courage. A thief, having deceived the queen, took the princess away and was preparing to get married to her but she succeeds to save herself and cut off the thief's nose. In the story 'Burha Burhi Aru Shiyal', it describes about a clever, courageous old women character, who was capable of wriggling out of trying situation or of outwitting the enemy. In this paper we will discuss about the different characteristics, portrayal of women in the Assamese folktales, from the collection of Folktales 'Burhi Aair Sadhu' by Lakshminath Bezbaruah and the perception of the readers for woman.

**Keyword:** Folklore, Assamese Folktales, Women, Perception, Cruelty, Portrayal.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Folklore is oral traditions, the lore, traditional knowledge and beliefs of cultures often having no written language and they are transmitted, generally, by word of mouth. Folktale is a folklore genre that typically consists of a story passed down from generation to generations orally. Fables, fairy tales, legends, etc. are some of the examples of Folktales. Folktales are not only for entertainment but also to learn morals values form the tales. It teaches us human values and ethics, which may also be used in our day to day life. It also allows the listeners to exercise their imaginations.

Folktales originate, grow, and are circulated among the people orally from one generation to another, and hence, the issues that affect the people get to be represented in the tales in various ways. In the old days when these tales took shape, the oppression of the king, the cruelty of the priests, and superstition among the people, for instance, were realities with which everyone was acquainted. Consequently, many of our tales voice concern over or present criticism of such issues. Although some of the tales does not convey any hidden agendas and simple exist for people's love for stories. The biggest reason why tales exist in every part of the world is for the nature human love for stories.

'Burhi Aair Sadhu' (Grand Mother's Tales),' Kaka Deuta Aru Nati Lora'(Grandfather and Grandson), 'Junuka', 'Sadhukatha' (Tales) are the best example of the collections of famous Assamese Folktales. The titles of the collection- 'Burhi Aair Sadhu' and ' Kaka Deuta Aru Nati Lora' suggests that Assamese story telling tradition have been kept alive by grandmothers, grandfathers and other elders. Modern technology may have weakened this tradition but in the past story-telling fascinates the heart of many little children's. Assamese language is rich with tradition of Folklore and Folktale; there are tales which expresses the primitive ideas about the status of women; and there are few tales which questions about the given position and status of women in the family and society. Even some of the tales which may seem simple may have great potential for criticism. The main focus of this seminar paper is to study and analyse the portrayal of women in the Assamese folktales, from the collection of Folktales 'Burhi Aair Sadhu' (Grand Mother's Tales) by famous Assamese author Lakshminath Bezbaruah, published in the year 1911. 'Burhi Aair Sadhu' holds up the uniqueness of the Assamese Folktales, language and culture.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

This paper is mainly written on the basis of orally transformed folktales of Assam. The secondary sources of this seminar paper are Books, articles, research papers. The method use in this seminar paper is qualitative in nature. The paper is based on analytical method.

## **III. OBJECTIVES**

1. To study about the status and portrayed of women's in the Assamese Folktales.
2. To understand how women are portrayed as women's worst enemy, in the Assamese Folktales.
3. To explore about the intelligence, courage and cleverness of the women's in the Assamese folktales.

#### IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are research papers available regarding different topics in the Assamese folktales. But the existing documents leave a scope for the study of portrayal of women in Assamese Folktales from the collection of tales 'Burhi Aair Sadhu'.

Sikha Devi Nath (2023), in her study Two Theoretical Frameworks of Folklore Studies and two Selected Tales from the Collection of the Assamese Folktales Entitled Burhi Aair Sadhu: A Discursive Analysis found that both the tales 'Tejimola' and 'Panesoi' offers a cogent view about the folktale(s) being a medium of symbolic representation of myriad human experience(s).

Mridul Moran (2019), in his studies Story-Telling Folk Songs Related to Assamese Folktales: An Introduction found that Story-telling folk songs related to Assamese Folktales has led us to put forth the following conclusion- Story-telling songs help the story-teller to tell a folktale nicely; the story-telling folk songs help to increase the interaction between the story-teller and the audience; the story-telling songs create or construct the environment and mood in the folktales; the story-telling folk songs are basically the voice or dialogue of the characters.

Dr. Deepsikha Gogoi Hazarika, in her study Folktales as Moral Instructor In Day To Day Life Of Assamese Society provide that folktales and its characters, situations, background and ethics spread all over the day to day life of Assamese Folk society.

Mridul Moran, Lokapriya Handique (2018), in his The Status of Women in the Assamese Folktale 'Mekurir Jiyekar Sadhu'(The Tale of the Cat's Daughter): An Analytical Study study found that Bezbaruah has led to the revelation of the social differences between men and women. This tale exposes or indicates some of the notable challenges, issues, obstacles and social division faced by women community in society.

Kalyani Hazarika (2019), in her study The Essence of Folktales and Their Functions in Assamese Society found that Assamese Folktales beliefs and ideas are formed specially based on folktales. Folktales have been bearing the Assamese folk culture. Taking elements from folktales, Assamese folk mind tries to shape their life.

There is no existing document can be seen on the concerning the portrayal of women in Assamese folktales: from the collection of tales 'Burhi Aair Sadhu'.

#### V. FINDINGS

1. Gender disparity
2. Biasness against women
3. Women are portrayed as extreme cruel villains
4. Wise women character who has acquired some skills or knowledge are shown as old beggars or witches
5. Male characters are never judge for their ill deeds

## VI. LIMITATION

1. The main source of data is oral
2. There is no primary data source of this seminar paper
3. The Age of data.
4. Lack of books, reports and articles.

## VII. DISCUSSION

The main concern of this study is to look into the various ways in which women have been represented in Assamese Folktales. The manner in which women are represented in literature and Folklore can be taken to be reflection of the manner in which society perceives or treats women. Folktales as original creations of a pre-literary society, sometimes serve as windows to look into that early stage of human society. Representation of women cannot, however, be always taken as a simple account of women's condition in society. Many tales, often employing exaggeration, and sometimes tending to be farcical, are hardly meant to reflect social reality. They do, however, often exhibit popular beliefs and prejudices.

In most of the tales of the Assam Folktales women are portrayed as women's biggest foe. Women are portrayed as an extremely cruel villains trying to torture and harm other in jealousy and inferiorities. 'Tejimola' is the best example of female jealousy, cruel wicked foster mother who torture Tejimola and kills her. In her ill will and pure jealousy towards her step daughter, as her husband only loved and adore her step daughter. Step mother gets her punishment by driven away from home. In the tale 'Mekurir Jiyekar Sadhu' (The Tale of the Cat's Daughter), the younger daughter was taken away by a merchant who has two wives at home. The two wives were looking for a chance to harm her in jealousy, as now she was the new favourite wife of the merchant. The first time when she gave birth, a healthy boy, they covered her eyes and telling her that she had given birth to a flail. They took the child to the river, and left it to mercy of the flow of the river. They did the same to her when she gave birth to her next child, after telling everyone that she had given birth to a pumpkin. 'Chilanir Jiyekar Sadhu' (The Tale of the Kite's Daughter), is another example of women's extreme cruelty. The merchant who already had seven wives marries the kite's foster daughter. The seven older wives were in extreme jealous of this beautiful new wife, and started making things difficult for her. On knowing that the foster Kite mother was helping her daughter they kill the Kite mother, and gives her daughter to a tradesman in exchange of goods.

In some of the tales the main female characters are mere passive characters, young beautiful and innocent, waiting for their respective characters 'heroes' to rescue them. In the tale 'Chilanir Jiyekar Sadhu', her foster mother had to help and protect her every time the other wives try to create some problems or tries to harm her. After Kite mother's death her husband had to rescue and protect her from the tradesman and his seven wives. In 'Tejimola', Tejimola's father had to rescue her from her wicked step mother, and bring her back to life. In the Folktales from Assam, it doesn't only describe about the women's sufferings, competition among women but it also describes the women's kindness, courage and cleverness. In the tale 'Chilanir Jiyekar Sadhu', the kite mother safes her foster daughter and takes care of her till the end when she sacrifice her life to save her foster daughter. 'Burha Burhi Aru Shiyal' (The old Couple and the Foxes), is an excellent example a tale that depicts one clever and courageous old women character. It is a simple story, which involves the

outwitting of the foxes by an old woman. In two occasions in this tale, the old woman faces death but stays alive for her presents of mind and outwitting the enemy. It is interesting to note that some Assamese folktales have women as such clever characters, which are capable of wriggling out of trying situation or of outwitting the enemies. The story 'Kata Joa Nak, Kharani Di Dhak' is about an exceptional courageous young wife. A thief took her away fooling the queen, who was planning to get married to her in a dwelling place inside the woods. When she came to know about his plans, she ties up his mother, took a good horse from his stable, and rode home. On her way back home she succeeded in collecting some of the jewels the thief had brought. Later she cut off the thief's nose while he was eavesdropping, and had him caught and executed. The prince solves all her problem without anyone help in her adventure. Such brave and courageous female characters are rare in the Assamese Folktale but they are not non existing.

In the Assamese Folktales women are expected to act innocent, pitiful and someone who can bring prosper to the family. In the tale 'Numoliya Po', woman is shown as whipping boy. She is beaten up by her husband to get back his self-respect. In the tale 'Lakhimi Tirota'(The Woman with the Characteristics of Lakshmi), on one hand the idea of a women comparing with goddess Lakshmi may seem flattering to women, but on the other hand it is actually a fraught with people. Very few women will have the prosperous Lashmi like quality. Majority of the women will be ordinary and lack in prosperous quality in home. It may serve as windows to look into the status of the women the pre-literary era, how the women were expected to be perfect for the family.

In the Tale 'OW-Kuwori' (The Ow Princess), the young prince desires to have the Ow princess as his wife and fulfils his desire by marrying her. However the tales does not give importance for the will of the Ow princess. A beggar woman suggests the prince with some advice to gain the princess. She is considered as a 'wise women' that appears in many tales of the Assamese Folktales. She is endowed with special knowledge, and is capable of helping out people in their needs. In the tale 'Paneshoi', there are two women beggars in the story which plays an important part in the story. First woman, who tells paneshoi that she is her brother's bride and suggests her that she should avoid marrying the young man. Another beggar, who advice the young man on the ways of get Paneshoi back from her duck form. Such characters are shown as beggar, which suggests that women who were talented and knowledgeable enough to be able to give useful advice to others are not accepted as normal in the society.

When we go though the stories of the Folktales, we realise that the women are blame and punish for their wickedness and wrong deed but the wrong doing of the male protagonist are never questioned. They are not judged for forcefully marrying young girls without their consent and they are approved to have polygamy, and marrying a young girl, which is one of the main reasons for the jealousy, competition and cruelty of women toward each other.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Assamese Folktales are wonder tales and trickster tales; there are tales with morals and tales which are meant for providing entertainment. Some of the Assamese tales bear some resemblances to the tales of the other regions, such as Bengal, but most of the tales are rooted in the environment and culture of Assam. In this tales we can study the different

representation of women in Assamese Folktales. By the different ways in which women are represented in the tales help us to understand about traditional Assamese society's attitude towards women. In most of the tales of the Assamese Folktale women are usually portrayed as extremely jealous, cruel and merciless, who tries to harm other. In most of the Assam Folktales women are portrayed as women's biggest enemy. Many tales involves the conflicts of the co-wives of the male lead, who is in a polygamous relation. But men are never questioned about polygamy and how he treats his wives. How man marries the young beautiful girls without their will. The will and desire of the women is always neglected in the tales. It helps us to look into the past, which indicates the status and portrayal of women in the society, biasness against the women can be seen in the male dominated society. There are some tales, where women are shown as protagonist of extraordinary intelligence, courageous, brave. It suggests that within the patriarchal society, there are women who managed to distinguish themselves from others. In many tales 'wise women' are depicted as old beggars and witches, who had acquired some special skills or knowledge, and who are capable of solving difficult problems. This study helps us to understand how women are treated from generations, resulting unequal man women relationship that we perceive today.

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