



FOLKLORE, GENDER AND SOCIAL NORMS: SOME SELECTED TALES FROM BURHI AAI'R XADHU

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Abstract: *Burhiaai'r Xadhu, a collection of stories compiled by Lakshminath Bezbarua was published in 1911 and is seen as an important cornerstone of Assamese literature. The stories contained therein have been narrated to every child within an Assamese household since then and are seen as an integral part of the Assamese folk lore tradition. Most of these stories are part of an oral tradition, reflecting the cultural norms of the region which Bezbarua collected and presented in an accessible form to an audience, thereby establishing a canon of children's literature. Since these stories are reflective of everyday life of the common folk of Assamese society, this paper will seek to critically analyze certain aspects of gender and patriarchy that are embedded within these tales. Ideas of traditional femininity and the imposition of a patriarchal code of conduct where a woman's worth is dependent upon her looks, behavior or modesty, is a recurring trope of these tales. Similarly the binaries of 'good women' and 'bad women' are introduced to children through these stories where invariably the 'bad women' always get punished for their transgressions. Marriage is portrayed as the ultimate reward while violence and suffering are shown as tests of virtue that contribute to their moral development. Male characters in the stories are often portrayed in a powerful position- as a father or king/prince who determines the woman's fate. Since these are stories narrated to children, they also serve as tools of gender specialization and a reflection of 20th century gender norms.*

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Introduction

Folklore refers to the traditional beliefs, stories, songs, customs, myths, and practices that are passed down from generation to generation within a community. It plays an important role in preserving the cultural and social identity of a society. By definition it 'comprehends all knowledge that is transmitted by word of mouth and all crafts and techniques that are learned by imitation and example as well as the products of such crafts' (Bascome: 1972:52) The enormous diversity of tribes and communities in Assam inhabiting the different hills and plains of the state furnishes an inexhaustible source material for folklore studies.

The significance of the study of folklore lies in the fact that they broadly mirror the social and cultural parameters of a society. They often reflect the moral values, beliefs, and social norms of a society. Folktales also play an important role in shaping and reflecting ideas about gender in society. In fact, gender is an important social construct through which folktales and their portrayals of characters, both male and female, myths, societal norms etc. can be understood, thus making it a key category of analysis. There has been emerging scholarship within folklore studies that examines these culturally rich stories and tales through the gender perspective. Merging the two with feminist literary criticism helps examine how each constructs and circulates ideas of femininity, masculinity, and overall gender.

To understand how patriarchy in folktales was instrumental in maintaining a cultural system of power and control, this paper looks at the very popular Burhi Aai'r Xadhu, a collection of Assamese folktales and compiled by Laxminath Bezbarua. The original collection consists of thirty folktales, collected and compiled by Bezbarua in 1911. This was one of the earliest attempts to collect and publish Assamese folktales and the book's preface emphasised upon the role of folktales in the nationalist uprisings in Europe. It

is significant to note that Bezbarua's compilation also took place in the background of the rise of the nationalist movement in India. Any consideration of the gender dynamics within the tales have to be done in the light of this very crucial background.

Discussion

Patriarchy as a cultural system proposes certain concepts of masculinity and femininity. Women should be patient, modest, and devoted to family, while men should be protectors and decision-makers. The folktales reinforce these traditional gender roles and notions of morality by portraying women as weak and vulnerable. This requires men to stand forth as their guardian and protector. The tales in the collection also reveal occasional moments of resistance despite traditional limitations.

An important theme within these tales is the construction of the "ideal female". Through certain qualities and actions of the female characters, the tales shape a model of what an ideal woman is. The notion of beauty and female body is a social construct and if a woman doesn't fall within the society's notion of beauty, then she isn't regarded a perfect woman (Hazarika: 2024: 622). The idealisation of beauty was seen as an essential element of femininity- Uses of words like '*rupohi*', '*kumolboyokhiya*' such as in the tale of *mekurir jiyekorxadhu ordip lip* in the story of '*OuKuwori*'. This exemplifies male gaze i.e. the way in which female characters are viewed from a male perspective as objects of desire by descriptions of their physical appearance. These descriptions idealise the female body in terms of youth and beauty. The female body especially of tender age as exemplified in the use of the term '*kumol boyokhiya*' (young age) establishes how beauty is the defining feature of a woman's worth. A woman's beauty is also essential in determining her marriage prospects or to establish a higher status within a household especially one with several co-wives. In the story of '*Mekurir*

JiyekorXadhu, the merchant is said to show more affection towards his younger and tender aged wife than his two previous wives (Moran & Handique: 2018:49).

Here it is pertinent to mention the concept of 'laagi'(preferred or favoured one) and 'alaagi' (unfavoured one) as a popular trope of showing the dichotomy of power and control. It also symbolizes the hierarchy within conjugal relations where the former always plays the upper hand in a polygamous marriage. In most of the stories usually the *laagi* is of a younger age than the other wives and dearer to the husband. The husband is also shown being swayed by her and unquestionably accepts any of her request (Hazarika: 2024: 623). This leads to conflicts between the 'laagi' and the 'alaagi' where women themselves becomes oppressors of one other. This does not reflect the inherent cruelty of women but rather displays the ways in which patriarchy forces women that compete with each other for favours and social status within the household. Therefore women sometimes become agents of the same system that marginalises and oppresses them.

Enforcement of Patriarchal Social Norms

Folktales as an expressive narrative, delve into much of the societal and cultural aspects of the community or individual and characters that it narrates. Even though the selected stories do not directly hint towards a particular community or society, the nuances are visible. Social norms and the existence of the patriarchal system within the narratives is omnipresent. Gender relations within the patriarchal system are also how these folktales carry much of the messages for its audience. As J.L. Fischer states in his seminal work *A Socio-psychological Analysis of Folktales*, which classifies folktales based on their content, social functions, structure, and the audience for whom they are written (or sometimes orally narrated) (Fischer:1963:236), it therefore remains true that

they are mirrors to the myriad realities that may have been disguised as mysticism and fantasies. Nevertheless, as the folktales move from the start of a conflict, which is ultimately resolved, social norms and structures are challenged. Behavioural and psychological norms revolving around familial and kinship relations depict the hierarchy within the world of the conjugal household.

The stories from Bezbarua's collection in *Burhi Aair Xadhu* discussed in this paper are a reflection of many aspects of the traditional Assamese society. Starting with the conjugal household, most of the tales depicted a common trope, which was a polygamous or bigamous marriage. The number of wives ranged from two as in *Tejimala* and up to eight as in *Silonir Jiyek*. Other stories like *Mekurir JiyekorXadhu*, *Tula aru Teja*, *Champavati* also follows this social norm and structure. The existence of polygamous relationships as a norm is also assumed due to the easy acceptance of such relations on the part of the women as well as the men. Male characters are shown to get into such marriages without much thought of their former wives. As it so happens, another norm that looms large in the tales is that of the age difference of the newly married couple, and this then is to the advantage of the male character (Nath: 2011: 34). As can be noticed in the stories of *SilonirJiyek* and *Tula and Teja* the protagonists who marry the men are already established in their social positions while the former are only coming of age and are shown to be tender and desirable. These are also the very qualities that entice the men to approach them, eventually making them *laagi* and gaining an upper hand over their sister-wives. Submission to the advances of the potential male husbands in the stories that happen with much rapidity is also a mark of the telling social strata that they reflect. Bezbarua's stories, which constitute a diverse multispecies universe, confine the human ones, particularly to the upper or upper-middle classes. Most of the male members or the head

of the patriarchal household are shown to be rich peasants, rich merchants (*dhonisaudagar*), kings, princes, etc. As Sanjeev Kumar Nath interprets, in *Mekurir JiyekorXadh* the actions of cutting the noses and ears of his older wives and throwing them out of his house upon knowing the conspiracy of disposing of his two sons after their birth was as easy as marrying the young girl (Nath: 2011: 43). As Nath states, the house is therefore 'a space defined by male rights and ownership' (Nath: 2011:43). A picture such as this then gives the casual male members the authority to exist even when it is the women in the narrative who are shown as the conflicted characters.

Desirability for the young is also shown alongside the limitations within the already existing marital relations with the men's former wives. These limitations, within the structures of societal norms and sanctity of the conjugal relationships, revolve around the ideas of fertility. Acceptance and preference for the male child were a significant part of the patriarchal systems in operation. Bearing a male child was also connected to making or breaking a woman's character in the story. The concept of the *laagi* and *alagi* as has been discussed, is ingrained as a reward and a punishment within the marriage and societal systems, as can be observed. She is a *laagi* as long as she bears a son. If the opposite happens, she becomes the *alaagi* and is immediately relegated to a lower position. The stories also depict the unwantedness of a girl-child who is also at times abandoned or when infanticide is attempted. Equally unfortunate is the barren women who suffer cruel fates. Beloveds turning into undesirable beings seem to be a recurring occurrence throughout these stories. Ousting them from the conjugal household and having them stay at a dilapidated shelter, mostly near a dumping ground or a swampy area, in a way robs the women of the very identity and how marriage was initially seen as a reward for the coming-of-age girl. Hence, all the existing wives had at

some point been the beloved of the husbands and due to either of the reasons might have made her obsolete within the traditional patriarchal society.

Childbearing or barrenness is usually a turning point in the stories, for it leads to conflict between the principal characters. Conflicts and dramatics are what make a narrative a folktale, as Fischer states, which then eventually gets resolved, not necessarily always by peaceful means, but also by hostility (Fischer: 1963: 237) and cruel death, as we have seen, for instance, in *Tula and Teja*. Other than children, conflicts within the household are also related to daily food, property, gifts from the husband, competition among the women etc. Along with societal, as Fischer in his work rightly says, there is psychological conflict persevered through.

On the one hand, if strict family norms were the trope of the selected narratives. Women were also seen possessing the wherewithal to be the decisive head. For instance, the story of *Lakhimi Teeruta*, which translates to a woman who brings prosperity or one who has the qualities of goddess Lakshmi, also showed women as being witty, clever, prosperous, and wise. The perception of women in it can be seen as a contradictory reflection within a familial setting, sidelining behavioural and hierarchical norms. Here, an old couple in the hour of death advised their family members to abide by the youngest daughter-in-law's instructions without fail. As the story develops, we see some of her instructions bring massive fortune, followed by grave misfortune and eventually a happy life. Giving of the reins of the household to a female member, despite her being the youngest, presupposes the existence of wisdom irrespective of the age factor. However, as Sanjeev Nath reviews, the notion of the ideal Lakshmi-like woman is problematic. That it was only identified with one of the several women in the house suggests that it was special and not common or ordinary. This implies that if any woman did not possess such qualities, they would

not be considered prosperous. Although flattering to women, Nath says that is where it becomes problematic (Nath: 2011:89). Besides, the fact that women were given the role of guiding the young cannot be neglected, like in *Tawoyekor Xadhu*.

If behaviours were also normatively accepted, the patriarchal structures also had normalised the concepts of beauty, desires, and descriptions of the female body through the male gaze. The Lacanian idea of the gaze as a tool of power and control brings forth the women subjected to being looked at and objectified more than deified. As Saurav Kumar Rai shows, how gaze matters in a patriarchal society where lust and lechery are seemingly dominant (Rai: 2019: 50). As discussed earlier, the idealisation of the young and desirable young female characters is described through the lens of a heterosexual male viewer. The narrative of the tales is also such which robs the female character of any agency if the male protagonist wishes to marry her. For example, in *Ou Kuwori*, when a beautiful girl emerges from inside an elephant apple, the prince is enticed by her, watches her bathe in the river and describes how her beauty and lustrous hair brightened every direction. After this incident, the prince is on a quest to marry the girl and desires her, at times even taking the help of an old beggar woman. Eventually, the prince and princess unite, but the narrative does not give any voice to the princess herself or her desires. It is mainly the series of the male counterparts that are seen making the initiative and acting as saviours of any misfortune that may have been the intention of such stories, wherein the humans are in disguise. If the gaze was a tool used by the male characters, conflicted or cruel female characters tried to control the narrative by internalising the same. *Silonir Jiyekor xadhu* gives a glimpse of such internalisation when some of the older wives decide to sell off *Silonir Jiyek* to a merchant who had come to sell his wares. The conspirators bartered her by enticing the merchant with details

of a *rupahi* girl whose beauty and qualities were unmatched by none. The trader, upon hearing this, begins drooling and agrees to take the object of his desire instead of money from the wives, '*ei suwalijonir roop-gun mudoitur aagot enekoi bornaisil je mudoir lubh laagi bostur besot mori suwali jonike loijabolo xi maanti hol*' (Bezbarua: 2025:50).

Agency and Resistance within Conflict

The sheer brutality and hostile behaviour of the older characters in the selected stories especially that of the sister-wives and step-mothers, is appalling to say the least. However, the question arises as to why it is mostly woman-on-woman conflict that the folktales talk about. The gendered nature of the conflict then needs another basis to justify itself. The conspirators' assertion then is the only way to resolve the conflict that had disturbed the normality of the household. It is this disturbance that is then sought after with resistance on the part of the characters concerned.

Although exploration can be furthered in this aspect, the stories that are under discussion here are taken as the context. Viewing through a gendered lens, the kind of agency that the conflicted women give to themselves is not only the justice they seek, but a resistance against the collective patriarchal structure. For instance, in the stories of *Silonir Jiyek*, except for one of the sister-wives, the rest of the six act together to get rid of the favourite and young wife, in *Tula and Teja* conflict between the sister-wives percolates down to their daughters, and in *Tejimola* the step-mother is extremely cruel and brutal to the point of killing her in a *dheki* (a paddy thrashing implement). These instances appear to be in their extremities; however, it is also a way to challenge the position of the husband or the father and who he favours, either a new bride or a beloved daughter from one of the marriages. Diabolical actions against the female character are the only way to distort the perfect image of the *laagi*, which they

see as a threat. In most of the cases, the advent of the new bride sets the course of disturbing events in the household. The social norm of polygamy is also challenged in its own way, since they want to erase the new bride's existence at all costs. Jealousy then further escalates into violence and sacrifices. It is also a mark of agency that is given to the negative characters in the stories, while the protagonists usually succumb to the fate created by the elders. Moreover, another aspect that is noticeable is that many of these acts of hostility are taking place when the male head is away from the familial space, allowing the women to take the lead. For instance, they had no say when and how or who he might marry. This then would agitate the already existing family hierarchy and ensue an environment of jealousy, competition, violence, conspiracy, and even murder. Even though the resistance is proven futile when the air is cleared and the male counterpart takes charge of the scene, which is equally diabolical, and even leads to disfiguration, killing, etc., but while the woman is taking the lead, the aversion and confrontation linger on.

However, much of the agency to resist and seek justice fell on the secondary characters who were hankering to secure their positions within the family. Another kind of resistance came on the part of the lead character, even if she mostly gave in to her elder's manipulations without opposition. It was granted the agency of resistance in the form of surviving. Survival within the universe of folktales can also be in non-human forms and shapes which then conforms to the mysticism and at the same time shows the legitimate authority to exist within the narrative and overturn an injustice that had occurred and finally resolve an issue, thereafter leading to the classic 'happily ever after'. As *Tejimola* (five transformations are seen moving from the plant to birds and upon justice being served, transforms back to the human self) or *Tula and Teja* (Teja transforms into a mynah bird and eventually, upon disclosure of

the manipulations, transforms back into herself) show, survival in non-human forms was an exceptional way to demand justice without being as brutal or violent as their opposite characters. The voices that were unheard from them while in their physical forms, raises in their non-human entities. It was, as Sanjeev Nath also mentions, these transformations, in fact, highlights the death-defying quality of the title characters, 'their tenacity and perseverance of woman to live and prosper even in extremely adversarial conditions' (Nath:2011:55).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the folktales of BurhiAai'rXadhu offer valuable insights into the gendered worldview of traditional Assamese society. The recurring representation of women as virtuous, obedient, and self-sacrificing works to construct and normalize an idealized vision of femininity. At the same time, male characters are often depicted as active agents of power, authority, and decision-making, reflecting the patriarchal social structure within which these narratives evolved. It normalizes gender hierarchies and reinforces the idea that women's virtue lies in their submission. Through such portrayals, folklore functions not merely as entertainment but as a powerful cultural tool that shapes and transmits gender norms across generations.

Therefore it is necessary to question and reinterpret these narratives rather than accept them uncritically. By foregrounding the experiences of female characters, it becomes possible to expose how these tales discipline women's bodies, desires, and agency while privileging male authority. Yet, within the constraints of these patriarchal structures, traces of female resilience, intelligence, and moral authority can still be found, suggesting that women's presence in folklore is not entirely passive. Therefore, re-reading BurhiAai'rXadhu through a feminist lens not only challenges the gender ideologies

embedded within the tales but also opens space for using folklore as a site of critical engagement.

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