

Representation of Women in Select Assamese Folktales

A Dissertation Submitted

To

Sikkim University



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By

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Date: 29-06-2022

DECLARATION

I, Rupu Dihingia, hereby declare that the research work embodied in the dissertation titled “Representation of Women in Select Assamese Folktales” submitted to Sikkim University for the award degree of Master of Philosophy, is my original work and it has not been submitted earlier to this or any other University for any degree.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled “Representation of Women in Select Assamese Folktales” submitted to Sikkim University for partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Philosophy in the Department of English, embodies the result bonafide research work carried out by **Rupu Dihingia** under my guidance and supervision. No part of the dissertation has been submitted earlier to this or any other University for any Degree.

All the assistance and help received during the course of the investigation have been duly acknowledged by him.

I recommend this dissertation to be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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“Representation of Women in Select Assamese Folktales”

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CHAPTER: I

Introduction

I

Folklore encapsulates the oral traditions of a community and implies an exclusive way of life which encompasses histories, cultures and traditions of human societies. It is a collection of fictional or mythical stories about living and non-living beings, of jokes, songs, folk dance, proverbs, urban legends, celebrated facts, mysterious events and even sayings. Folklore as a field of study was developed in the early 19th century in Europe. At first, the aim of folklore was to trace down the old customs and beliefs of human civilization. The term 'folklore' was coined in 1846 by William Thoms. With the publication of *Morphology of the Folklore* (1968) by Vladimir Propp, folklore studies had garnered a rapid interest in academic circles. The Folklore Society (established in 1877) of London and The American Folklore Society (established in 1888) also helped in generating further research and discussion on the subject.

Mac. Edward Leech defines folklore as "the generic term to designate the customs, traditions, beliefs, tales, magical practices, proverbs, songs, etc."(401-402). Alan Dundes defines it as "autobiographical ethnography ... a people's own description of themselves."(471)

The Assamese community is one of the communities of Assam dwelling mostly in the valley of Brahmaputra. The people of Assam make up a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious society. There are more than hundred tribes and sub-tribes residing in Assam. Every tribe has its own ethnic uniqueness on the basis of religion, language, culture and social customs. The racial intermixture among the population of Assam has made a distinct cultural diversity that can be seen in the fiction too. Assamese folklorist Jogesh Das in his book, *Folklore of Assam* (1972) has pointed out some aboriginal traditions of tribal and non-tribal communities including myths, magic, fairs and festival, folk music and dance along with their oral literature. The name 'Assam' is probably a contribution to the present state by 'Ahom' or the Assamese community. According to Kamrupar

Buranji the modern name 'Assam' was derived from the word 'Acam' which later became known as 'Asam' (Assam).

Folk culture and literature is a canvas of a region which shows the backdrop and surroundings of the folk. Assam, the land of folktales, has a lot to provide in this respect. Among the popular writers of Assam, Lakshminath Bezbaroa can be considered one of the pioneers when it comes to compiling folktales. He is known as 'Sahityarathi' (a person who has a firm literary grip) for his greatest contributions towards Assamese literature. He compiled innumerable folktales related to Assamese oral culture and framed a distinct field in Assamese literature in the early 20th century. He published sixty five folktales in three collections and included two in a short story collection. His folktales mainly bear two purposes: moral education and entertainment. The themes of his tales are centred on ideal society, unity, solidarity, social rules and role of the people in the process of social reform. His most notable books are: *Burhi Air Sadhu* (Grandmother's Tales), *Koka Deutaaru Naati Lora* (Grandfather and Grandsons), *Litikai* (Story of Litikai), *Rongmilir Haahi* (the Smirk of Rongmili), *Surabhi* (surbhi), *Junuka* (Junuka), *Baakhar* (baakhor), *Sadhu kothaar kuki* (sadhu kothar kooki) and *Kekuholi* (kekuholi) are Bezbaroa's short story collections. Modern study of folklore in Assam began with the contributions of Birinchi Kumar Barua (1908-1964) who was influenced by American and European folktales. The most popular book of Birinchi Kumar Barua is *Asamar Loka sanskriti* published in 1961. In Assam, Birendranath Datta (1935-), an Indian academician, folklorist, is believed to be the pioneer of Assamese folklore who introduced it in academics.

This dissertation takes up a critical study of *Burhi Air Sadhu* (1911) by Lakshminath Bezbaroa and *Folktales of Northeast India* (2008) by Bhaskar Roy Barman to discuss the different folktales of Assam. Besides these, some other tales collected from the field and transcribed and translated into English have been analysed for the purpose of this research. This research endeavours to examine the representation of women in Assamese folktales. It has for its focus tales pertaining to the Ahom community of Assam. The study will also engage with the question of women's agency in the selected tales, patterns of change and continuity within the same. Women in traditional settings with which

these tales are attached are often argued to be without agency, as opposed to modern women with a formal education, a job profile, and so on. However, it needs to be argued that a lot of agency adheres to women in these traditional settings as well. This research will thus have to engage with the patterns of change and continuity in women's agency from tales ranging from traditional to modern settings.

Burhi Aair Sadhu has been read as an allegory that holds the secret meanings and different symbolic representations of nature, history and social customs of Assam (Gogoi 2018). The value of Bezbaroa's *Burhi Aair Sadhu* in terms identity construction has also been discussed (Gogoi 2016). In terms of representation of women, it has been argued that women have been depicted in stereotypical roles in *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (Buragohain 2020). In their article "Retelling of Assamese Folktales from a Feminist Perspective: A Reading of Tejimola and the Tale of Kite's Daughter" (2021) Talukdar and Gogoi discuss women's position in Assamese society vis-à-vis identity, class and inter-personal relationships shared by women. That Bezbaroa's tales mirror social reality and also shed light on the position of women in society is hardly contested. Though Bezbaroa's tales are recognised as being very significant in Assamese society, it is also felt that he has "co-opted women to valorise a distinct Assamese cultural and national identity" (Barua 7). Consequently, "demonstrations of female agency are rarely seen" (ibid 9).

In terms of women's relationship to nature, one knows how looking on nature as all-giving and nurturing and the bracketing of women and nature together is a problematic trope. But venturing beyond this problem, there have also been arguments that contend that despite this, nature can actually bring about an eco-consciousness in women. Nature renders women more conscious of themselves as individuals and "free-spirited" nature helps women overcome spaces that are limited by patriarchal beliefs (Chaterji 5). It has also been observed that in stories like "Tejimola"(also spelled as 'tejeemola') the human world and the natural world come together through Tejimola's different lives as plants and trees after she is killed by her jealous step-mother. Nature is no more a "mute 'backdrop'" (Bhattacharjee) in the tale of Tejimola. Instead Tejimola's "grief, her embodiments, and the environment are all enmeshed together in the telling of the tale" (ibid).

Kalyani Hazarika in the essay, “The Essence of Folktales and Their Functions in Assamese Society” (2019) explores how there is a holistic connection between the human and the natural world as depicted in Assamese folktales. Hazarika argues how “nature is much better than the cruelty or ugliness of men” (63) thus suggesting how nature, like women, have been at the receiving end of injustice by the hands of men. Moran and Handique have discussed how women were not in a position to voice their concerns in a male dominated society in their article “The Status of Women in the Assamese Folktale ‘Mekurir Jiyekar Sadhu’ (The Tale of the Cat’s Daughter): An Analytical Study”. They also argue how women were seen not as human beings but as “sexual beings” (50).

In an article titled “The Roles, Importance and Position of Female Gender in Assamese Society: analysis through the Assamese Proverbs” Deka argues how some proverbs are indicative of women’s marginalisation in a patriarchal set-up but there are also some proverbs which lend a certain agency to women. She argues the proverb “*Dasa putra sama kanya*” (43) which means a daughter is equal to ten sons is a case in point. While oral narratives mirror certain inequalities in gender relations as suffered by women, some oral narratives also reflect the agency that adheres to women. This dissertation has attempted to look at ways in which this manifests in Assamese folktales.

II

Gender as a construct has been discussed by many feminist critics who have tried to look at ways in which universally recognised notions of masculinity and femininity have pervaded the way in which human societies go about their lives. Judith Butler makes this very argument pointing out that it is gender performativity through which gender binaries are naturalised:

Because there is neither an essence that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender and without those acts there would be no gender at all. (522)

Thus, according to Butler, although gender is a pre-given identity it mostly works as ‘gender’ when individuals perform those acts which are directed towards a specific category, i.e. male or female. So,

the acts or performance define ourselves what we are or our identities are in a society. For instance, if a child is a girl, then she needs to follow the specific gendered rules that are assigned to her by the society; and if she does not follow them, she will fall under the category 'abnormal' or 'unnatural' which is mostly evident in case of gay and lesbian people. Beauvoir, in this regard, says that if a woman "lights a cigarette in a cafe, if she goes to the cinema alone, an unpleasant incident quickly occurs; she must inspire respect by the way she dresses and behaves: this concern rivets her to the ground and to self" (749). Referring to this fact, Butler strongly emphasises that the distinction of an individual should not be made on the basis of anatomy, or the body.

Michael Foucault also asserts how both the physical body and the sexuality of an individual are socially, culturally and politically constructed. Foucault, in his book *Discipline and Punish* states that the gender ideologies are indirectly related with power structure of society which helps regulating these discursive notions through practice and performance. He argues that the body of a woman is the prime site where patriarchal power politics are at play. He asserts that there is no 'natural body' or pre-discursive commandment, it is human who is "amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies" (217). Angela King, while talking about Foucault's view on gender ideologies in her article, "*The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Discipline of the Female Body*" writes that the differences between men and women do exist in a society and it exists only on the basis of biological sex, and "it is the way that anatomy is socially invested that defines gender identity and not the body itself" (5). She also writes that

"Male and Female should not be conflated with masculinity and femininity. They are discursively produced identities that invest the body, producing certain characteristics that are taken as evidence of a male and female essence and an ineluctable difference between them. The 'naturalness' of gender is constantly invoked, but masculinity and femininity are the disciplines of the body that requires work." (5)

American philosopher, Susan Bordo, in *Unbearable weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1993) points out about the metaphor of 'body politic' while talking about the submissive nature of physical body, "the human body is itself a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control"(21). She stresses that women have been dominated mainly through their bodies; and being an object of power politics, gender and sexist ideologies have also been directed to them on the basis of biological differences. Anne Balsamo, in her book *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* has also stated that women are "victims of a pathological physiology" (p.42) and thus, the physiological disparity marks them seen as substandard from the male stand point. Greek philosopher, Aristotle described women as a being "afflicted with natural defectiveness"; St. Thomas Aquinas as "imperfect man" and a "misbegotten male" (qtd. in King, p.31). However, feminist critics assert that the relationship between men and women is based on the dual paradigm of mind and body. Women (the body) are, thus, thought to be fragile, irrational, emotional; and a tool of men's desire and the nurturer of their off springs; whereas men (the mind), on the other, symbolise the strong, rational, source of knowledge. So, the mind dictates all commandments to the body and it (the body) only reacts to them. Hence, the distinction between the mind and the body has now become universally recognised in both social and cultural contexts. This somehow, creates a biased orthodox expression while performing day to day tasks in a society. This has resulted in the loss of autonomy in women and resulted in the violation of their agency. For example, a woman's body is identified with the relation to men; a woman in her childhood is idolised as daughter, and a wife and mother after her marriage. Moreover, the conceptualisation of women as dutiful wives, obedient daughters, kind mothers prevents them from embracing their truest potential. Meenakshi Thapan, in "Images of the Body and Sexuality in Women's Narratives on Oppression in the Home" writes about the experiences of women's violence and psychological oppression in the home. Indeed, the domestic space is also characterised by violence where women have to fulfil certain duties and prove themselves as good housekeepers, mothers, cooks, contend with other women and so on. Thapan also views female body as a "body-for-others" (72) which has been culturally and socially constructed to exercise femininity. This femininity in turn disempowers women

while seducing them (Barkley 2). As Bordo points out, the body is a “practical...locus of social control” (qtd. in Thapan, 72). In *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* Butler argues that body and gender are two different things where body is being given a gendered identity. While bodies are controlled and contained, the violation of bodies also brings about psychological trauma.

However, the female body has also been seen as “the first, central and conflictive space for women for defending their place” (Gloss 57). Even as the body becomes the site where patriarchal power is exerted, the body also becomes a vehicle for the expression of agency. Butler asserts that power not only forms objectification of individual, but also creates and sustains agency and existence. As Butler points out in her book *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* “ambivalence is at the heart of agency” (18).

While ecofeminists argue that the domination of women has emerged from the same ideology that dominates nature, they also contend that it is this very clubbing together of women and nature that lends them agency. Ecofeminism is grounded on the premise that nature and women both are closely connected to each other. Ecofeminism uses feminist principles to examine the associations of nature with women and values a non-patriarchal world where the correlations are greatly respected by every living being. It has also emphasised the various ways of gender expression that has influenced social norms to exercise its power over women and nature. However, the philosophy of ecofeminism advocates for a sacred world where to admire human-nature reliance would be a prime concern for every person. Moreover, ecofeminists respect all forms of life as valuable and believe that they can only be sustained through utmost care and co-operation.

French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne, credited with using the term “ecofeminism” for the first time (1974) advises that to neutralise the demolition and dominance of nature and women, both environmentalists and women should come together to fight against the male dominated society which promotes gender stereotypes, inequality and repression. Merry Mellor, an environmental activist, in her book *Introduction to Feminism and Ecology* writes about the basic principles of ecofeminism in the following manner:

Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It emerged in the mid 1970s alongside second wave feminism and the green movements. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women. (1)

Indian writer A. K. Ramanujan has depicted the ever-present bond of women and nature in his translation of the folktale “A Flowering Tree”. The folktale is a part of his book *A Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India* (1997) wherein there is a kind of sisterhood between a girl and a tree. Nature has the same feelings as women in the tale. Each time the girl becomes a tree, she begs other people not to pluck anything from the tree except flowers. If she gets hurt or mutilated in her tree form, she cannot be repaired or cured in her human form. The only way to heal her is to make her a tree again and put all the broken branches back together. The tale presented the importance of non-human world and made an attempt to show an innate interconnection between ecology and women through a literary discourse.

Sage Kapila (*Samkhya philosophy*) relates women with nature and states that women are the most important part of *Prakriti*, i.e. nature. *Prakriti* implies female creative power. Thus, it is believed that the energy that is needed for life to be born can only be seen in both nature and women and in this respect. Vandana Shiva also states that nature is symbolised as the embodiment of the feminine identity as it produces life and provides sustenance. Shiva, in her book, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* explains:

All existence arises from the primordial energy which is the substance of everything, pervading everything. The manifestation of this power, this power, this energy, is called nature (*Prakriti*). Nature both animate and inanimate is thus an expression of *Shakti*, the feminine and creative

principle of the cosmos; in conjunction with the masculine principle (Purusha), Prakriti creates the world. (37)

In Shiva's conception, nature becomes as expression of the feminine and creative principle, thus drawing attention to the agency in women vis-a vis their close connection with nature. Taking cue from the concepts of gender, body politics and ecofeminism discussed above, this dissertation seeks to engage critically with the tales selected for the study and examine the complexities underlying representation of women in the same.

III

This research thus aims to examine the depiction of women in the select Assamese folktales through a close textual analysis of the texts through a qualitative methodology employing the theoretical framework afforded by feminist and ecofeminist theories of gender. Tales have been collected from the field for this analysis and secondary sources like journals, books, articles, interviews and other relevant published literature have been collected. Some of the aims and objectives of this research is to interrogate the various ways in which women and nature have been represented in the tales. It will try to explain the deep connection that women and nature seem to share in the text. It will interrogate whether women and nature seen as one and the same in these tales and dwell on the implications of such a stance.

It will also attempt to discuss how the folktales and lived realities of women intersect in the select texts. Since women have been seen primarily as bodies through the slide of time, this research will try to explore how women's bodies are foregrounded in the tales and how women are seen and see themselves. It will thus try and explore the concept of "body politics" vis-à-vis the position of women. Finally, this research aims to look at ways in which women assert their agency and put up resistance against overarching patriarchal norms in the tales.

Although some discussions and researches have been conducted on texts like *Burhi Aair Sadhu* and *Folktales of Northeast India* a detailed exploration of the same through a feminist and ecofeminist perspective are very few. Moreover, explorations of tales told orally, tales outside of these texts have not received enough critical attention.

This dissertation has three body chapters apart from this introductory chapter and the conclusion at the end. The second chapter of this dissertation “Folktales of Assam: An Overview” begins with an overview of Assamese folktales from the Ahom community. It attempts to describe the significance of these tales with reference to the proposed study. This chapter explores various ways Assamese folktales reflect the complex layers of reality surrounding community living, gender roles, human-nature dynamics, among others. It tries to set the tone for the chapters following it, by presenting an overview of the kind of tales taken up for the study as well. The third chapter “Re-reading Gender: Women in Assamese Folktales” examines the representation of women through the lens of body politics and the relationship between nature and women in the tales. Women are seen primarily as bodies that are in need of control, disciplining, punishment. Their bodies become a prime site where patriarchal norms are inscribed. This chapter thus argues how women’s bodies are seen as “other bodies” and condescended upon in more ways than one. The chapter also explores the relationship between women and nature and how this relationship is closely integrative and fulfilling for women. This chapter argues how ecological crisis that is a huge concern can be addressed effectively when one comes to an understanding of the fact that there is no hierarchy between the human world and that of nature. The intricate connection between women and ecology that is seen in the tales suggest how women are empowered by nature and how they can effectively address ecological crisis. The fourth chapter “Change and Continuity: A Reading towards Women’s Agency” attempts a reading of the agency of women in the folktales vis-a-vis the changes and continuities that constitute society. It looks at ways in which the agency or the power to act, among other things, is manifested in the tales. It is premised on the feminist argument that agency cannot be seen in binary terms like absence/presence, or silence/voice. Despite the miserable situations or the misdeeds committed against them women in the tales are able to assert their agency. Resistance in this chapter is read as an “everyday practice”

(Harcourt et.al, 6) rather than a concerted political action. Women resist the reductionist approach to their bodies; they are able to see that they are not simply their bodies. Resistance as re-reading and re-telling of tales is also explored in this section where Chandrica Barua's re-telling of a few tales from *Buri Aair Sadhu* are taken up. Along with this the plurality of resistances manifested by women in tales like "Tejimola" (or Tejeemola) and "Tula and Teju" are discussed. It is hoped that this dissertation can bring about a more nuanced understanding of gender and gender relations vis-à-vis the position of women in Assamese society which can in turn open up various ways of thinking about a more equal and equitable world of which the tales studied in this dissertation are an integral part.

CHAPTER: II

Folktales of Assam: An Overview

Introduction

Assam, the land of Red River¹ and blue hills; is known for its enchanting beauty and rich cultural heritage. It is a north-eastern state of India which is called the gateway to the North-east India. Assam is surrounded by Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan in the north, Mizoram and Tripura in the south, Nagaland and Manipur in the east and Bangladesh and West Bengal in the west. Assam along with all the six states of North-east, i.e. Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Sikkim has come to be part of the Seven Sisters of the North East. North East India has always been bearing a great resource for folk culture and literature. The region has provided a diverse ethnic folk background through tales, legends, myths, proverbs, songs, music, dances, and clothes as such. Assam is also gifted with captivating river valleys, green lands, flora and fauna and hospitable climates. Apart from Assam's scenic geography, the Assamese folk culture has also played a very crucial role in the lives of its people.

Folktales are indeed an invaluable part of a community and a major form of oral literature. It epitomises racial sentiments, traditional customs, and societal agendas along with a socio-political consciousness. Folk stories personify human and superhuman activities and are often moral and allegorical in nature. Assam has a great variety of folk narratives. Folktales in Assam are generally known as 'Sadhukatha'² which was told by the grandparents. Renowned Assamese folklorist, Dr. Prafulla Dutta Goswami in his literary work *Ballads and Tales of Assam* (1960) says that 'sadhukatha' implies the tales narrated by merchants. He opines that the Assamese word for an oral tale is 'sadhukatha.' Usually derived from the Sanskrit 'sadhu' means a merchant and 'katha' means a tale. 'Sadhukatha' is thus a tale told by a wandering merchant.

¹ Red river signifies the river Brahmaputra.

² The word 'Sadhukatha' signifies the term 'folktale' in Assamese language.

In the introduction to *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (1911), Lakshminath Bezbaroa has pointed out that *sadhukatha* signifies a tale that is told to teach a moral lesson. He also tries to show that the Assamese folktales also include fairy tales, animal fables, supernatural tales, trickster tales and riddles. These narratives convey moral instructions, entertainment and metaphors of an ideal homeland. Academic interests in these stories have rendered them valuable sources for socio-cultural analysis.

Like all other fictional narratives, folktales have also been transmitted and handed down from one generation to another generation. Hence, in the process of transmission, it gets reshaped and re-fashioned by a narrator or a story teller. Nevertheless, the attempt towards reviving these folktales was first made by the American Baptist missionaries. The beginning of missionary work in Assam began in the first half of 19th century. Books on different literary subjects, i.e. science, religious writings, children books were published and made accessible for reading. In the same way, they had also initiated certain awareness programs to talk about the need of education and the importance of native languages. A number of Assamese riddles along with their answers were published in the magazine “Arunodoi” (1849-1854) for the first time. However, retrieving the old verbal tradition of a distant community was not a mere task for them. The first collection of folklore writing in Assam was done by C. A. Soppitt: *A Historical and Descriptive Account of the Kachari Tribes in the North Cachar Hills with specimens of Tales and Folklore* in 1885. *A Collection of Kachari Folk-tales and Rhymes* (1895) by James Drummond Anderson was another literary work on Assam folklore. In 1896, Philip Richard Thornhagh Gurdon examined the different kinds of Assamese proverbs in his book, *Some Assamese Proverbs*. From then on, local leadership in Assamese folklore studies was initiated by several scholars. This led to works such as Benudhar Rajkhowa’s *Assamese Demonology*, 1905; Bhadrasen Bora’s *Ramcharit* (Riddles), 1885; Gopal Chandra Das’s *Asamiya Patantarmala* (proverb), 1900; Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (folktales), 1911; Jogesh Chandra Tamuli’s *Nichukani* (folk songs and rhymes), 1914; Dimbeswar Neog’s *Akul Pathik* (Bihu songs), 1922.

The modern study of folklore in Assam was pioneered by Lakshminath Bezbaroa. He was one of the torch bearers of ‘Jonaki era’, the age of romanticism in Assam³. Bezbaroa cannot be described simply in words when it comes to his contributions towards Assamese literature. During his life span, he completely dedicated himself to reviving the folk tradition of Assam. Through his literary works, he extended a helping hand towards the development of the Assamese literary canon. He was honoured as ‘Roxoraj’⁴ by Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1931 and ‘Sahityarathi’⁵ by people of Assam. Bezbaroa is not only the first story writer in Assamese but has also contributed in many fields like drama, poetry, novel, biographies, essay etc. Among all the other works, his most notable books in this regard are *Junuka* (1910), *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (Grandmother’s Tales, 1911), *Koka Deuta Aaru Nati Lora* (Grandfather and Grandsons, 1912). His famous short story collections are *Surabhi* (1909), *Sadhu Kathaar Kuki* (1912) and *Junbiri* (1913). At first, Bezbaroa had started his literary works just to entertain toddlers, but then he concentrated more on satirical writings on Assamese life. His masterpiece *Burhi Aair Sadhu* can be understood as an attempt to show the importance of language and Assamese culture. The setting of the tales is mainly based on Assamese society portraying local habitation, folk beliefs and customs. The tales emphasise collective community awareness. Again, in the book, *Koka Deuta Aaru Nati Lora* (Grandfather and Grandsons), Bezbaroa has presented a beautiful relationship between grandson and grandfather; while elucidating the stories grandfather gives all sorts of ethical messages to his grandson so that he could triumph over difficulties in his life. However, stories like “Kon aaru Mon” (Kon and Mon) show familial bonds and relationships of two brothers. It explains that people must not allow others to take advantage of them just because they are related by familial relationship. In the end, the story represents an old woman who helps Mon (the protagonist) to resolve his difficult situations.

Birinchi Kumar Barua (1908-1964) was another folklorist following Lakshminath Bezbaroa. He was the founder of folklore research in Assam. After the completion of his education, he was greatly

³The age of romanticism in Assam is known as ‘jonaki era’ in Assamese literature. The term ‘jonaki’ implies enlightenment and the writers of this era had imitated Wordsworth, Keats or Shelley by adapting their romantic sensibilities. In this era, writers like Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Hemchandra Goswami had focused on the relationship of humans with nature, beauty and arts.

⁴Roxoraj means the king of humour.

⁵Sahityarathi implies a person with a firm literary grip.

influenced by the folk literature of his native land. In the year 1955, on the initiative of Birinchi Kumar Barua, Gauhati University started the *Folklore Archive* which later came to be known as *Department of Tribal Culture and Folklore Research*. Barua's most pioneering literary work was *Asamar Lokasanskriti* (Folklore of Assam) in 1961 and the first survey ever on folklore in Assamese language. During his short life span, he had contributed plenty of literary works in the field of Assamese folklore, art, culture and literature. The most prominent thing was that his works were always directed to the folk culture of Assam. His other prominent books are *A Cultural History of Assam* (1951), *Studies in Early Assamese Literature* (1952), *Modern Assamese Literature* (1957), *Asamiya Bhasa aru Sanskriti* (Assamese Language and Culture, 1957) among others.

Prafulla Dutta Goswami (1919-1994), the student and successor of Birinchi Kumar Barua, was one of the most notable folklorists of Assam. He was the first folklorist from India to visit the United States of America as a visiting professor. Goswami applied motif-index catalogue to examine Assamese folktales and ballads. Among his notable works are *Folk Literature of Assam* (1954), *Ballads and Tales of Assam* (1960), *Springtime Bihu of Assam* (1966).

Birendra Nath Datta, (1935-) is an acknowledged expert of folk literature who tried to build up an archival research centre for the preservation of folklore in Assam. He has not only taught future folklorists under his supervision but also has provided abundant information on local folk field. His contributions *A Bibliography of Folklore Materials of Assam and Adjoining Areas* (1978) and *A Handbook of Folklore Material of North-East India* (1994) are the works undertaken in collaboration with Nabin Chandra Sharma and Prabin Chandra Das. In his days, Assamese folklore research had received financial support from The Ford Foundation in the end of 20th century. This foundation extended its support to the Cultural Studies Department towards fulfilling its needs. After the initiation of Gauhati University, a number of social science researches have been done in Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language Art and Culture (ABILAC). North-East India Council for Social Science Research (NEICSSR) and Asom Sahitya Sabha also has encouraged other people to document and publish books on folklore.

At the moment, the Department of Folklore Research has widened its theoretical approach and welcomed other growing tendencies to fortify regional awareness of and academic intervention in folklore. On the other hand, in terms of folk writing at present, we can talk about Nabin Chandra Sharma, who is an eminent folklorist of Assam. *Asamiya Loka Sanskritir Abhas* ('A Glimpse towards Assamese Folk culture', published in 2018), *Aair Mukhor Sadhu* ('Tales of Grandmother', published in 2016) are Nabin Chandra Sharma's renowned books based on folktales and folk culture. There are many other lesser known folklorists in Assam who are working with these tales, amongst them Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi, Sashi Sharma, Shib Tapan Basu and Lila Gogoi are remarkable.

Indian writer A.K. Ramanujan in the preface of his book, *Folktales from India* (1991), views folktales as a poetic text that carries some of its cultural contexts within it; it is also a travelling metaphor that finds a new meaning with each new telling. So, a folktale is the source or the provider of different native dialects, which represent villages, rural kitchens, tribal huts and indigenous habitations of the people. The setting of the tales mostly deals with rural folk and thus, the rural elements are easily noticeable throughout them. Besides that, folktales also replicate the socio-cultural expression of the folk, such as folk songs, dances, clothes and different kinds of food.

Folklorist William A. Wilson (1981) declares that the study of folklore is not just a pleasant pastime useful primarily for whiling away idle moments. Rather, it is centrally and crucially important in our attempt to understand our own behaviour and that of our fellow human beings. The practice of storytelling is common in every society. People love to hear stories and may have experienced a visual description of old customs that could have been a bridge across generations. In Assamese society, folktales have a major role in the lives of people. The traditional Assamese tales are examples of an intangible heritage left behind by ancestors, incorporating wisdom and knowledge of the past. Folktales are the personification of day-to-day life of the folk and activities of a society; such as farming, fishing, hunting, and adventures etc. They often work as an instructional device to the people by depicting universal dichotomies, i.e. good /evil, right /wrong. Folktales also provide a guide for good behavioural patterns by exposing some undesirable traits of human mind like greed, jealousy,

deceit, cunningness and its consequences. On the other hand, loyalty, faithfulness, honesty are regarded as moral virtues which appear in most of the tales.

Apart from entertaining and teaching moral values, folktales also depict environmental consciousness. It is obvious that the natural and human world is both linked with each other. But human activities have triggered radical changes that are largely responsible for environmental crisis. So it becomes important to help people cultivate an environmental ethics to understand the worth of nature. Folktales, in this respect, try to consolidate a positive approach to protect natural resources for sustainable development.

Folktales help to extend our visions to look into the past and also serve as windows to perceive our own place in the world. Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Bhaskar Roy Barman in their books, *Burhi Aair Sadhu* and *Folktales of North East India* have provided these evidences through the tales. Stories, such as “The Tale of the Cat’s Daughter”, “Ow Kuwari”, “The Creation of the River Brahmaputra”, “The Legend of Jayamala”, “The Staircase to The Moon” portray certain beliefs of Assamese people. These tales demonstrate how people had deified certain animals and entities. Similarly “Tejimola”, “Tula and Teja”, “Champavati”, “Paneshoi”, “Kanchani”, “The Tale of the Kite’s Daughter” exemplify the plight of women and the social prejudices against them. Polygamy, bigamy, witchcraft, matricide were seen as acceptable in society. In these tales an ideal women had to be blessed with certain features, such as purity, devotion, tolerance, submissiveness etc. An ideal woman cannot complain about her problems and injustices. She had to obey the rules governed by patriarchal society. In tales like “The Lucky Woman” women are being worshipped as Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Stories like “A Gardener and a Flowering Plant”, “The Long Legged One”, “Tikhar and Sutibai”, “The story of the Son-in-Law”, “The Son-in-Law with Night Blindness”, “Lotkon” represent a typical Assamese household image. Most importantly, some tales give glimpses of Assamese festivals and foods. “The Monkey and the Fox” shows the use of banana, sugarcane and milk in a typical wedding. The story “Tit for Tat” epitomises the Bihu festival of Assam and the rituals of Assamese folk. Activities like

threading *Gamosa*⁶, silk dhoti, silk chadar, presenting new clothes to the children and the husbands on the occasion of Bihu festival are also mentioned. People, mainly women get excited and travel to their parent's houses for a couple of days to celebrate the Bihu. The story "Tikhar and Sutibai" also portrays the tradition of making *pitha*⁷ which is very well-known in Assamese households. In "Tula and Teja", the story portrays the use of fishing tool, Jokai⁸ in Assamese household. Moreover, the story brings into focus some types of typical fishes of Assam, such as Kuri, Seni, Lachun, Bhangon, Kuchia⁹, Angulisepa and crabs that are very famous in Assam.

Of the tales concerning women, "Tejimola" is one of the most popular tales in Assam where in a lonesome girl is tortured and killed by her step-mother in the absence of her father. After Tejimola's death, her step-mother buries her in a corner of the backyard. But from her grave, Tejimola springs up as a bottle guard plant. When her step-mother recognises that the plant is none other than Tejimola, she takes a knife and cuts it off and throws it back of the house. After some days, Tejimola reappears as a citrus tree from the place where the gourd plant was thrown. Each time someone approaches the tree, it resists and asks not to harm. Eventually, the citrus tree is pulled out and thrown away in the river and there, it again emerges as a lotus tree. After then, Tejimola's father, on his return, sees the lotus and intends to pluck it for her daughter. When he extends his hand, it wails and sings to him that she is his daughter Tejimola. Her father gets surprised after hearing the song. He, then, takes a sweet in one hand and some chewed betel nut in other hand, and tells the flower that if it is his daughter Tejimola then the flower will transform into a bird and take the betel nut. Once he does that Tejimola transforms herself into a myna and takes the betel nut. Thereupon, the bird explains everything to the merchant and gets back to her human form and her step-mother gets punished and drove her out from home. In the story, there is a most remarkable connection between women and nature. The story has clearly presented an equation of a relationship which is ever-present in our lives. The various forms Tejimola has taken to save herself from her step-mother are very noteworthy in the tale. When Tejimola dies, she emerges as a bottle guard tree, a citrus tree and a lotus. This signifies a friendship where women

⁶Gamosa: a piece of cloth fabricated with soft cotton thread, it is an essential part of Assamese culture.

⁷Pitha: an Assamese snack made of oil, molasses and rice.

⁸Jokai: a kind of fishing tool made from bamboo in Assam.

⁹Kuchia: common eel in Assam.

and nature both help each other to sustain themselves. Moreover, it also shows how both entities are trying hard to run away from physical violence. When Tejimola becomes a tree, she constantly prays and asks other people not to harm her and that ironically reflects the destruction and exploitation of nature by the human world. Eventually, the story portrays the kindness of people (Tejimola's father) who helps in reviving her and also symbolises human benevolence towards nature and human nurture of nature. Also, it signifies how when human beings take care of nature they are actually taking care of themselves. When Tejimola's father respects the lotus and has empathy for nature, he is re-united with his daughter and is rendered happy and joyful.

“The tale of the Kite's Daughter” is another popular story of a girl who is raised by a kite. Here, the author has beautifully presented a mother-daughter relationship through a kite and a girl child. The kite is depicted as a mother figure of an orphan girl who was abandoned by her mother just after giving birth. The tale highlights many biased practices related to patriarchal society, such as undesirability of a girl child and polygamy. It narrates the journey of an orphan who grows into a young girl under the care of a kite. The kite does everything to make her daughter happy. Days and years pass, the child grows into a beautiful young girl. But, her beauty becomes a source of fear for the kite:

The girl had grown very beautiful and mesmerising. But her beauty became a source of fear for the kite. She was afraid that her daughter's beauty might some day cause her trouble. So one day she said, “O dear daughter! Your charm and beauty has always amazed me! I'm happy that you have got such a unique beauty. But my dear, I'm afraid that you might face danger because of this enchanting beauty. That is why I advise you to call me this way if you ever need me,

“The banana leaves dance in breeze

My kite mother flies to me.” (trans. Duarah 65)

Eventually, her daughter gets married to a rich merchant who has already had seven wives. After her daughter's marriage, all the seven wives make a plan and kill the kite. The daughter doesn't understand anything and as a result, all her sisters-in-law sell her to another man. The kite's daughter

is very upset and sings a song about her misfortune. When her husband hears the voice, he understands everything and takes her home with him. The story, here, speaks about a beautiful relationship about a kite and a girl child. Even if the girl child was abandoned by her parents, but eventually she gets what she deserves; a mother and a companion who has raised her and taught her everything.

The story “Ow Kuwari” highlights a mother-daughter relationship through the character of a girl and a fruit. The story starts from a queen who gave birth to an Ow Tenga¹⁰. Later, it is revealed that the fruit becomes a beautiful girl and comes back to her human form every night to sleep next to her mother queen. The queen is very sad after giving birth to a fruit and throws it in the garbage every morning. One day when the girl is taking a bath, a prince sees her and is instantly charmed by her beauty. He then decides to marry her. After the marriage, the prince cannot find a way to catch his wife in her human form. He gets depressed and feels vulnerable at the same time. One day, an old beggar woman comes and tells him how to catch her as a human. Later that night, as per the suggestion of the old lady, the prince pretends to sleep and secretly burns the vessel (the fruit) right after the girl comes out from it. After getting her in the human form, the prince is happy and re-arranges his wedding with her and they live “happily ever after”. In many tales taken up in the chapters that follow men, usually rich and powerful ones, take a fancy to beautiful girls and proceed to marry them and make them their own.

Some other tales that are discussed in this dissertation have been collected from the field. Of the tales that could be collected many mention women who are either marginalised because of issues like infertility or on the grounds that they practice sorcery. “A Legend of a Woman” tells the story of a woman who was unjustly tagged as a witch and tortured by her husband and relatives. At that time her nine month old daughter had fallen ill. She had been beaten mercilessly by her husband and relatives and lost all strength. Later, unable to come to terms with all her miseries, she had hanged herself. Accounts of how her spirit had come back to her village and she could even be heard weeping terrified people. They arranged for some rituals to be performed to get appease her spirit and get rid of her. The woman’s “hauntings” stopped after her daughter’s death, implying a re-union of mother and daughter

¹⁰Ow Tenga: Assamese term for Elephant fruit.

in the spirit world. Another bereaved mother is cast in the tale “Story of an Infertile Mother” who is crippled because of her infertility. In this tale a woman longs to have a child but is unable to do so. Along with her husband, she is forced to take recourse to black magic to bear a child. However, the child dies after a few months and the parents are left heartbroken and rendered mad with grief. They leave the village unable to stay on. The villagers are happy at the departure of the couple but their happiness is short-lived. They start to notice how their children fall sick and act different and “abnormal” at night. The villagers then go to conduct rituals to ward off the evil spirit of the infertile woman who they believed had jumped into a river due to her grief and desperation. In this tale one sees how the infertile bodies of women are seen as disabled bodies and how they are victimised due to their inability to give birth.

Women’s role as sacrificial wives and mothers feature prominently in tales like “The Story of ‘Joymoti’” and “The story of Behula”. Joymoti, the wife of prince Gadapani is hailed as a courageous and devoted wife who helped her husband claim his rightful throne of the Ahom Kingdom despite the King’s ploys to prevent him from doing so. When prince Gadapani flees to the Naga Hills, Joymoti refuses to co-operate with the king’s men when asked about his whereabouts. She is tortured and they even pour hot water on her but she refuses to say a thing about her husband’s location. She is physically tortured for fourteen days, two weeks at a stretch, but she refuses to comply to the king’s men or his wishes. She succumbs to her injuries in the end but goes on to be remembered and immortalised as the queen who liberated her people from the evil and vindictive king. In “The Story of Behula” Behula is the wife of Lakhinder who is the youngest son of a merchant. When her father-in-law refuses to worship the goddess Manasha she strikes all his seven sons with death. Behula is unable to accept her husband’s death and so she ventures across mountains and valleys and makes her way to heaven. She begs the goddess Manasha to give her husband’s life back and in return she would offer puja (prayers) with her father-in-law. After hearing her, the goddess Manasha grants Lakhinder his life back and blesses her for their future. Behula is seen here as a prototype of an ideal wife who is ready to go to any lengths to save her husband. She does not hesitate to jeopardise her own self and risk bodily harm in the process.

Women seem to be projected either as evil destructive witches or as devoted and docile wives and mothers in most of these tales. It is apparent that the relationship between father and children is mostly exploited by the step-mother. Unlike the typical mother figure, the character of a step-mother has been depicted as cruel and selfish. Tales like “Tejimola”, “Tula and Teja”, “Champavati” have been perfect examples where the father appears as sympathetic and the step-mother as egoistical and vicious in front of her step-children.

The biological mother is always portrayed as loyal and affectionate towards the children who adore them without any discrimination whereas step-mother and co-wives are immoral, cunning and disloyal. In the tales, both step-mother and co-wives appear as villains who do not even hesitate to kill their step-children and co-wives. For example, in the tale “Tejimola”, the step-mother kills Tejimola and buries her body in her own house. After the re-appearance of Tejimola as a plant, she cuts it off and throws it away as garbage. Again, in “Tula and Teja” and “The Tale of the Kite’s Daughter” the co-wives are shown as the murderer of the mothers of Teja and the kite’s daughter. In “Champavati”, it is Champavati’s step-mother who forces her father to marry her to a serpent.

The depiction of beggar women in the tales indicates a marginalised existence of old women. This implies that the knowledgeable and wise women are not somehow accepted as “normal” in the society. Moreover, there is no clear explanation of why the women who play a crucial role in changing people’s lives are always depicted as beggarly and ugly. In most of the tales, it is seen that the beggar women are most intelligent and give suggestions and ideas to needy people. In “Ow Kuwari” when the prince is not able to see his wife in her human form, a beggar woman helps him to get his wife in her human form. Again, in stories involving Tejimola, Tula and Teja, Champavati, Kanchani, the beggar women play pivotal roles. The beggar women’s knowledge and kindness mark them as exceptional but these very attributes have alienated them from the other members of the community. Besides, they can neither be fit into the role of a submissive wife or a beautiful woman.

In stories like “Lakhimi Tirota” and “Tit for Tat” women are represented as independent and divine beings. “Lakhimi Tirota” is a story of a woman who has been regarded as “Lakshmi” the

goddess of wealth and prosperity. The word “Lakshmi” is a reference to those women who have been endowed with the divine characteristics of the goddess Lakshmi. As, it is often thought the wealth of a family comes through the good fate of the woman whereas misfortune is often counted as a result of poor luck of the newlyweds. So, the wealth remains as long as the good woman in the house remains. Being a Lakshmi of the house the woman is seen removing all the hardships of her family. The steps she has taken for her people always appear as auspicious. For example, as per her suggestion one of the brothers brings a piece of cow dung to the house but instead of complaining she keeps it inside the house. Five years later, a king is in need of cow dung that has been around for five years to the cure his daughter’s ailment. The woman then sends her brother to the king to give him the cow dung and in turn obtains two pots of gold and silver for her family.

The idea of women as Lakshmi may apparently be pleasing and even flattering for women, but is always associated with expectations laid on a woman to be prosperous and productive all the time. When a woman is called Lakshmi, she is generally marked as fortunate and expected to handle any situation in life. Material wealth and acquisition go on to characterise the value of women. This equation of women with material wealth becomes rather problematic. The analogy between women and the goddess Lakshmi does not simply represent her fate or destiny but her actions, wit and ability to garner resources and exploit them as well.

The story “Tit for Tat” is one of the tales of the book *Burhi Aair Sadhu* which portrays women as brave and cunning. In the story, a young wife is unfortunately tricked by a thief. He introduces himself as her long lost brother and comes to take her home for some days. After having outwitted the young wife, in the middle of the journey, he confesses his evil intention to her and suggests her to be ready for their marriage. At that point, the young wife gets terrified but waits for the right moment to escape. After getting to his home, she finally gets her opportunity in the next morning when the thief is not at home. She ties his mother up reaches her home on horseback. This story is about a woman as brave and clever. Though, she was kidnapped by a thief she did not seem to give up her hope even for a moment. Unlike the other women characters of the text, she has overpowered the traditional perception

of the society where women are determined as a weak and ignorant. In her quest, she does not take any help from any man and does everything by mostly herself. In the tale the young wife figures as an extraordinary woman character in the world of Assamese folktales. Such brave women characters are rare to come by, but not non-existent both within the stories and beyond.

The popular legend of Kamakhya speaks of another mythical woman Sati as a powerful goddess of fertility. The back story of Sati's humiliation by her father Daksha and her husband Shiva and the mutilation of her body is marked with violence though. Sati becomes another ideal woman who jumps into the fire overcome with regret and shame at having invited her husband's wrath and caused him embarrassment by not listening to him in the first place and going uninvited to her father's banquets. Pushed to the corner by both her authoritarian father and her wilful husband, Sati has no option but to immolate herself. However, the legend of Kamakhya depicts Sati as a good wife and her death is interpreted as an embodiment of love and admiration for her husband.

Since folktales are mostly popular with children, there is a lot of literature suggesting how Assamese folktales contain a number of moral qualities. While listening to a particular story, it is believed children can also gain insight that helps them to embrace the ethical qualities of the tale. It is thus not wrong to say people take help from folktales to build the character of their children. The book *Burhi Aair Sadhu* has presented a variety of tales which contain these ethical elements. Stories such as "The Monkey and the Fox", "The Crow and the Sparrow", "Tit for Tat", "The Long-Legged One" have noteworthy moral bearings. Folktales usually include animals, birds and different types of natural objects because children can easily understand what message the tales try to convey. The tales, in this respect, provide for that strange and imaginary world where animals and birds talk, trees and lifeless entities walk along with humans. Folktales, in some ways, are like 'cartoons' to the children. They get to see what they wish for and this also instructs and encourages them towards a decent future. However, these tales children grow up listening to can also mar their understanding of their place in the world by inducting them into unequal gender roles.

Recently, Chandrica Barua's re-telling of some of the folktales compiled by Bezbaroa from a feminist perspective has addressed this issue. Barua's title *Stories by the Fire on a Winter Evening: Assamese Folktales Read and Re-told* is an apt indication of this re-telling of tales that have been around for generations. She argues how while some tales in *Burhi Air Sadhu* reflect on the plight of women in society they also perpetuate certain negative stereotypes of jealous co-wives and step-mothers. Since children may not be able to negotiate with these problems of representation, she hopes she can re-tell these stories in a way that can "aid in children's egalitarian personal development free from gendered stereotypes" (10). The story "The Kite's Daughter" in Barua's version tries to address the issue of jealousy and competition between co-wives, each of them vying for their husband's praise and appreciation. Barua tries to contextualise the co-wives' anger against the kite daughter by narrating she was lazing around instead of doing her share of the housework. In the climax of the story, the kite's daughter who had been cast out by the co-wives refuses to come back home to her husband since she realises the marriage was not good for her. In doing so, the cruel fate met by the co-wives in the earlier version of the tale, is averted. In the earlier version, the co-wives are killed in a gruesome manner by their husband. In Barua's re-telling that violent cutting up and killing of the co-wives is thus eliminated. Barua's venture is reminiscent of Suniti Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables* wherein she addresses inequality in gender relations through the re-fashioning of fables she had grown up hearing or reading about. Both Barua and Namjoshi's projects entail a re-telling and re-reading of oral narratives they have found problematic in terms of the representation of gender. The next chapter of this dissertation will also engage in a re-reading of folktales selected for the study and try to explore ways in which these tales can be thus read in ways that can make a more equal and equitable society possible.

CHAPTER: III

Re-reading Gender: Women in Assamese Folktales

Introduction

In the tales selected for this study, it was found that there is a pre-occupation with the bodies of women: the ways in which they are inscribed with prescriptive patriarchal ideals, the ways in which they transgress those ideals, the ways in which they are contained and punished, and also the ways in which these bodies resist this containment and control. As has already been discussed in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, reading ways in which women's bodies are treated and perceived is a relevant aspect of gender studies. The first section of this chapter looks at the ways in which women's bodies have been posited across the folktales selected for the study. The next section deals with the relationship between nature and women and how this relationship has been portrayed in the tales. Women's alliance with and integral connection to nature brings about many possibilities of resistance in these tales. This chapter attempts to look at the various configurations of prescription, transgression, containment and resistance in the tales selected for the study.

In some stories birds and animals are symbolized as a mother of a human child; in "Ow Kuwari", the fruit of Ow tree (elephant fruit tree) is portrayed as a mother figure which depicts an affectionate relationship between women and nature. Again, stories like "Tejimola", "Tula and Teja", "Paneshoi" show an intimate bond between women and nature. On the other hand, stories such as "Champavati", "Paneshoi", "Kanchani" personify the sufferings of women in their lifetime.

In the same way *Folktales of Northeast India* has some interesting folk stories of northeast India. This book has seven parts and each part of it talks about the folk tradition of each state of the Northeast. Stories like "The Creation of the River Brahmaputra", "The Legend of Jayamala", "The Staircase to the Moon", and "The Princess with the Thirty-two lucky Signs" are indicators of early folk tradition of Assam. In a way, these tales have portrayed a spiritual bond between nature and people ever since the

written documentation was made available. The women have long been associated with the socio-cultural mechanisms of a society. Being a part of the society, women do acknowledge them either willingly or unwillingly. While following these mechanisms, it is often seen women have come across many difficulties in their life span. They have been continuously belittled, disregarded and “othered”.

Other Bodies: Women and Body Politics in Select Tales

“The Tale of the Cat’s Daughter” is the first story of the book *Burhi Aair Sadhu* and it depicts the issues like marginalisation, sufferings and disfiguration of women in society. As the story progresses, it depicts a society which is rife with male chauvinism like most of the folktales of the text. It hints at the approval of polygamy in the society and the marriage of the Cat’s daughter as a third wife of a merchant. Though polygamy as a traditional practice may be welcome by women too, not all polygamous marriages could be happy. Similarly, not all polygamous marriages could be disastrous. This dissertation takes cognizance of this fact while trying to engage with polygamy as represented in the tales selected for the study. In “The Cat’s Daughter” the two elder wives of the merchant have been portrayed as jealous women. The young wife, the daughter of the cat, is a beautiful and naive woman, a common trope in the folktales. The jealousy of two wives is shown as an offence throughout the tale while the husband’s conduct (marrying his third wife) is acceptable and not questioned at all. Despite having two wives, the merchant marries a young girl as his third wife. Women are simply shown as objects that the men quickly tire of. When a man gets attracted to a girl, it does not matter whether he is married or not; he simply earns the authority to marry the girl. But, in case of a woman, once she gets married she is not supposed to look at another man, leave alone desire him. This bartering of women and the closeting of women’s desire is a common trope in most folktales. Men’s desires are legitimate but women are never seen as desiring bodies not only as “other” bodies.

Again, wounding and disfiguring of women is not seen as an issue of concern in this tale. Rather it is shown as a way of punishment if the wives hesitate to follow the word of the husband. Cutting off the noses and ears and throwing women out of the house depict the worse kinds of physical discrimination of women in the society. These women are thus physically tortured, brutally murdered, mutilated and

their bodies become a prime site on which all this violence gets carried out. This violence can also be seen in tales like “Champavati” where Champavati’s python husband slices his demon-mother (who had been troubling Champavati) in two halves and starts to live happily with his wife. In “Paneshoi” the beautiful Paneshoi disguises herself as a goose to avoid being married. Her suitor, however, tricks her into believing he is fast asleep. When Paneshoi transforms into a beautiful girl and leaves her goose slough behind, he quickly gets up and burns it. Paneshoi falls unconscious but he pours cold water on her head to revive her. After making sure she stays a beautiful woman, Paneshoi’s suitor marries her and the tale says they live happily ever after.

Through the story, the value of a woman is not clearly pointed out. When the cat’s daughter is falsely accused of giving birth to a *dhekithura*¹¹ and a *rongalao*¹², the merchant considers her as evil-fated and instantly drives her out from the house. As she is no longer capable of bearing his children, she has clearly overstayed her welcome in his house.

Men in the story do not come under the scanner for marrying girls young enough to be their daughters, and for cutting off their wives’ body parts. As soon as women come of age or mature, they are seen as being ripe for marriage and claimed by men. Naomi Wolf discusses the idea of a “beauty myth” that says women must always aspire for a certain impractical standard of beauty which would be ultimately validated by men desiring that beauty:

The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called “beauty” objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women’s beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless. (12)

¹¹DhekiThura: a piece of wood used for grinding rice. It is the main part of grinding machine which is used by the Assamese people.

¹²Rongalao: Rongalao is the Assamese word stands for pumpkin.

In Wolf's contention, beauty is not only connected to physically pleasing attributes but also to reproductive abilities in women. All women in most of the tales discussed in this chapter seem to have their worth measured in terms of these two factors—beauty and fertility. Being single is hardly an option at all, staying unmarried is staying ugly and undesirable. In all the folk tales read so far, there are hardly any single women. Choosing to remain single is not a profitable or even wise.

The tale "Ow Kuwari" is a magical story of an Ow princess who is very beautiful. This story recounts the wish of a prince to have a beautiful princess as his wife. The Ow Princess gets married to a man without her consent, to a complete stranger. Marriage as an institution seems to favour only men here. The richer the men are they seem to be more and more outside of the realm of accountability altogether.

However, like in many other stories, the tale remains silent in terms of the girl's desire.

In the story "Tejimola", the reader comes women represented in different roles as step-mothers, The step-mother is almost always portrayed as a cruel and cold-hearted villain in the folktales. Every villainous act in a folktale is played out by women characters. In the story, every reader and listener can see how mean and brutal Tejimola's stepmother is, but no one ever notices the reason behind her brutality towards her step-daughter. She is a mean and selfish woman perhaps because she does not have any children of her own. She too has been at the receiving end as an infertile and childless woman. Secondly, her husband seems to pay less attention to her and is more affectionate towards his step-daughter. Hence it can be argued that the step-mother's bitterness and hatred of Tejimola is a result of her own misery and the way she has been alienated and expected to bear every difficulty in silence.

In the tale, it is not clear why the merchant had married his second wife. There is no evidence of love in their marriage but one thing that is a constant in their relationship is fear. It seems she had taken care of Tejimola only out of fear and once the merchant left, she unleashed her anger on Tejimola as

she no longer had to fear her husband. The pitting of women against each other and the latent rivalry in them because of a man is noteworthy here.

“The Tale of the Kite’s Daughter” is one of the most remarkable tales loaded with various suggestions of marginalisation of women and boy-child preference in society. In the very beginning, the potter threatens his wife saying he would sell her to the *Nagas*¹³ if she gave birth to a girl again. For a society, the value of a girl child was nothing and way cheaper than that of a boy. Again, the mother who abandoned her beloved girl child just because of her husband’s command indicates an imbalance in power relationships between men and women. Her love and desire for her own children become only secondary and she is forced to please her husband instead. She constantly tries her best to mollify him with a boy child. Every times she gave birth to a girl, it becomes a burden for her.

The sufferings and helplessness of the kite’s daughter after her marriage depicts the effects of polygamy in the society. After becoming a wife of the merchant, the kite’s daughter is miserable. She loses her kite mother and is sold to a tradesman by her co-wives. Here, one sees the co-wives also being complicit in the trading off of another woman. They too perhaps hope to reap the benefits of the “patriarchal dividend” (Connell 79) that accrues to men who are complicit in the project of consolidating the power of men over women and other men. Perhaps these women are also internalising patriarchy as well as the way men deal with women who are troublesome by simply sending them away or trading them off.

When the merchant comes back, however, it seems the co-wives are in for a cruel punishment. When the merchant comes to know about their conspiracy, he punishes them with spikes in a ditch and buries them in the ditch. This gruesome murder and physical violation of the co-wives is presented as a natural and even fitting consequence of their actions. Women’s bodies are disposed of and meted out with the most disturbing and horrendous acts of physical violence in this tale too.

“Tula and Teja” is another tale in Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s *Burhi Aair Sadhu* where jealous co-wives share a very difficult relationship. Here too, the younger wife seems to be more favoured than the elder

¹³Naga: a hilly tribe of Assam who were generally considered as uncivilised and barbaric in the tales (sic).

wife. Men seem to have a preference for younger women and newer wives in most of the tales. This problem related to age is pervasive in most tales where there is a tension between young and old wives. Even though older women are seen as wise and experienced, old age is not desirable. This is an ambiguity that clouds the tales too, an ambiguity Hazel Biggs observes in her essay “The Ageing Body”:

The ageing body represents a dichotomy between the strength of wisdom and experience, and the fragility and vulnerability of physical and mental deterioration. Yet these descriptions reveal obvious contradictions. For how can a person be both wise and in the process of mental decline? Such ambiguities are indicative of the tensions prevalent in social attitudes and responses to the aged and ageing.... (169)

The young wife Laagi turns the elder one Elaagi into a tortoise and has her killed in a fit of rage and jealousy. At the spot where Elaagi is buried two trees bearing fruits and flowers grow. One day the king comes to see Elaagi’s daughter Teja under this tree and expresses his desire to marry her when she comes of age. When Teja grows up, the king marries her. She takes her brother Kanai to the palace too but their step-mother Laagi is green with jealousy. So she turns Teja into a sparrow and sends Tula to the palace instead of Teja. Teja who is now a sparrow tries to warm the king and he tells him about her fate. The king is angry and he gets Tula killed and cut into bits. The meat is sent to Laagi and her husband as a gift. Unbeknownst to them, Tula’s parents consume her meat at night and realise what they did only next morning:

The next day, early morning Tula’s mother stepped out from the bed and saw that the two men from the king’s house went away and the wicker basket has been kept in the entrance of the house. She opened the wicker basket and found the hands, legs, and the head of Tula and recognised her. She understood very well about the meat she ate the day before with so much pleasure and started crying loudly in sorrow. (trans. Saikia 85)

In this tale too the barbaric act of cutting up a woman's body and reducing her to "meat" is presented as a natural consequence of Laagi's long list of sins against Elaagi. The graphic narration of Tula's parents eating their daughter's meat is cannibalistic and horrifying. Tula gets reduced to not just a body, but a deviant and mutilated body who had helped her mother to execute her cruel plan against Teja and her mother. Her body is not just othered but also rendered inconsequential and totally destroyed in the process. Also, one sees how daughters get caught up in the tensions between mothers and women end up perpetrating violence against each other.

"Champawati" is a mystical tale in the book *BurhiAair Sadhu* which depicts a desertion of girl child, jealousy and revulsion through women characters. As usual, the story begins with two co-wives, Laagi and Elaagi. Under the influence of Laagi or his favoured wife, the husband leaves his beloved daughter (Champavati) and elder wife (Elaagi) to lead a miserable life in the backyard of the house.

When Champavati is propositioned by a python (who also happens to be a demi-god) Champavati's step-mother insists she be married off to the python. She asks her husband to make arrangements for the wedding immediately. Laagi's actions signify her hatred and ill feelings towards her step-daughter; she who did not hesitate to marry her step-daughter off to a giant snake. While Champavati cries and begs her father expressing her unwillingness to be married off, her cries fall on deaf ears. Her father does not listen to her but agrees instead to get her married. She is cast as a liability, someone to be taken care of, and hence cast out as the python's wife by both her step-mother and her father.

In tales like "Story of an Infertile Mother" and "The Story of Jayamala" women who are childless are automatically considered infertile and rendered miserable. In the first story, even if people don't say it out loud, they believe that it is the woman who is infertile. She comes and snatches other women's children in their dreams and she is demonised. Nobody takes into account the possibility of their partners' infertility but invariably point fingers towards the women. Virility is accepted as the characteristic standard feature of a male body. Men's bodies are therefore seen as the standard (fertile) against which women's bodies are compared and seen lacking (infertile). This is also reflected in Sally Sheldon's argument in her essay "The Masculine Body":

These understandings of men's and women's bodies resonate in obvious ways with contemporary gender wisdom about male and female social roles: men are seen as stronger, harder, not connected to reproduction, their bodies are more stable, less likely to dysfunction; women are understood as weaker, softer, intimately connected to reproduction, their bodies are less stable, more likely to dysfunction. (24)

Men's bodies are hardly connected to reproduction, and thus they are hardly seen as responsible even if they are infertile. Their bodies are idealised and seen as strong and inviolate, whereas that of women are seen as weak and fragile.

In "Legend of a Woman" a woman is victimised and tortured physically based on her husband's understanding that she is evil. She is accused of indulging in sorcery and black magic. Casting women in a diabolical role is a part of the surveillance of women as aberrant and deviant. By locating evil in the women's bodies and punishing and disciplining them, they are contained and controlled effectively. Ultimately, women's bodies are the sites on which patriarchal power and systems of surveillance are unleashed.

Women and Nature: Depiction of Women and Nature in Select Tales

"The Legend of Jayamala" is a celebrated tale of the book *Folktales of Northeast India* by Bhaskar Roy Barman. The story highlights a Brahmin woman who suffered a miserable life for not having a child of her own. At the same, she is portrayed as a mother figure who bestowed her motherly love upon birds and animals, regarding them as her children. Even if Jayamala is not a biological mother she is still given the "normative assignment of caring" for children (Lyonette 201). On the other hand, the idea that biological mothers alone are capable of maternal love is challenged here. Jayamala does not need to be a biological mother to love her non-human children. Similarly, in "The Kite's Daughter" too the kite is cast in the role of a mother who takes care of a human child. The kite does quite a decent job at raising the girl while the girl's human mother abandons her. The idea of the

universal presence of the “maternal instinct” in women is also challenged here; abandonment of children is something that is not part of the spectrum of this “instinct.”

When Jayamala is mistreated by her husband and replaced by another wife, she weeps bitter tears into the river making the river salty. The elephant king notices this and sees Jayamala is a beautiful but sorrowful woman. He is taken with Jayamala and he proposes to make her his queen. Jayamala is thus transformed into a beautiful elephant queen and she declared as the leader of the elephants. This bodily change from one life-form to another, human to animal, is an interesting trope both in this tale and that of the “Boga Ghura” or white horse where a woman becomes a horse and guides her people in the village. The white horse is formerly a woman who had been seen as a transgressor and wronged by her people. However, when she takes the form of a horse, her reputation soars and she comes to be known as a guardian of her people. As a horse, she seems to find more respect than as a woman:

This is an interesting occurrence even in the tale of Jayamala who finds more respect as an elephant than as a woman. For women, salvation comes in the form of physical transformation into other life-forms in nature. Nature plays a salvific role in the lives of these otherwise “fallen” or wronged women. (trans. Dihingia, n. page)

This kind of salvation in other life-forms also appears in stories like “Tejimola” where she becomes a bottle-gourd plant, a citrus tree and a lotus consecutively. Even after her step-mother kills her brutally, she lives on and even possesses the power to speak and communicate to people as a plant or a flower. Tejimola finds support and alliance in nature, she finds a “voice” in nature, and she is ultimately saved by nature. Though her father facilitates her turning back into a human when he meets her when she is a lotus, the change is actually made possible because she is able to voice her concerns and explain her predicament as a lotus. Interestingly, whether it is a citrus tree or a lotus, Tejimola is still Tejimola even as she takes on these life-forms. No essential difference seems to be at work between these different life-forms. Though Tejimola is ultimately given her human form, she is heard and liberated as a non-human life-form.

In the story, “Ow Kuwari” one can see a spiritual bond between nature and woman as a mother and a daughter. The fruit ‘Ow Tenga’ is presented as a mother figure and a companion of the girl, Ow Kuwari.¹⁴ However, when the mother queen throws the fruit in the garbage, it comes back to her every night. This personifies the ways of how nature stays alongside humans even after human negligence. Nature is shown as reliable and consistent in imparting love and nurture. The moment prince burns the fruit; the girl instantly faints in front of him. When nature (symbolised by the fruit) gets hurt women get hurt too.

“Tula and Teja” is another tale that depicts various transformations of human into some non-human entities. In the initial part, the story shows Teja’s mother who is metamorphosed into a turtle after being cursed by her co-wife. Moreover, when the turtle is captured and killed, the turtle also emerges as a hibiscus tree and a citrus tree. This shows the constant longing of human beings to stay alive in the shade of nature. Again, the protagonist, Teja also undergoes a physical transformation as a *saalika*¹⁵ bird while being cursed by her step-sister Tula. Apart from the transformations, superstitions and black magic can also be seen in the narrative, such as the transformation of Teja’s mother who was pushed in the pond by her co-wife while chanting magic spells. Most importantly, the correlation of nature and human world presents an environment where nature is being entwined with human feelings. When Teja’s mother gets transformed into a turtle, she never forgets about her children, she is still their mother. She has arranged enough food for her children so that they can stay healthy. Every time the turtle mother sees her children she grieves over her inability to stay beside them. On the other hand, her constant transformations into hibiscus and citrus tree mirror the unconditional love of a mother for her children whom she does not want to be left alone. Then again, the transformation of Teja into *saalika* bird symbolises an ever present integration of both entities, i.e. nature and women in a society. Nevertheless, women and nature share an integral relationship here. The identity of women as merged with nature that appears here is interestingly observed thus:

¹⁴Kuwari means princess in Assamese.

¹⁵*Saalika*: it is an Assamese term for the bird common myna.

The identity and destiny of women and nature are merged. Accordingly, feminist values and principles directed towards ending the oppression of nature. It is ultimately the affirmation of our kinship with nature, of our common life with her, which will prove the source of our mutual well-being. (Collard and Contrucci, 30)

In the tale of “Paneshoi”, the girl Paneshoi takes refuge in a pond and the hollow of a tree to escape marrying her brother, or the son of the woman who had given refuge to Paneshoi in the house. Paneshoi had been born from an egg which the woman had kept in the house not knowing a beautiful girl would emerge from that egg. Here, the birth of a girl is not from a female womb but from an egg. This is most extraordinary and intriguing. Similarly even in the tale of “The Cat’s Daughter” the babies in the wombs of a cat and a woman get exchanged after the cat curses the woman who had tricked her by not giving her fish to eat. The cat had caught the fish which the woman had agreed to cook but the woman had deceived her and kept aside only the bones for the cat. So the cat gives birth to two beautiful daughters whom she loves very dearly and nothing seems amiss in their relationship. The daughters too accept the cat as their mother and they enjoy a very healthy relationship. Birthing in both these stories becomes a “natural” phenomenon where other life-forms in nature produce a human form.

When Paneshoi grows into a beautiful young woman, the woman who had taken her in as her own daughter goes about arranging for her to be married to Paneshoi. Paneshoi’s “brother” had taken a fancy to her and would not come down from the attic unless his demand of marrying Paneshoi would be fulfilled. The woman seems to have no choice but to marry Paneshoi to his son. However, Paneshoi is not happy about the marriage when she comes to know of her mother’s plans and her brother’s demand. An old beggar woman advises Paneshoi to take refuge in a pond and the hollow of a tree to avoid being married :

The old woman said, “I advise you to make a boat and stay in the big pond behind your house. Do not come to the bank of the pond even if you are called. At night, hide yourself under the hollow of the tree near the pond.” The old lady left the place. Paneshoi came home, made a boat and went

on rowing in the pond water. The old widow called her but she did not come out of the water.”

(trans. Rajkhowa 107)

It is interesting how Paneshoi gets help and advice from the old beggar woman when she least expects it. She doesn't even know who the woman is when they first meet and yet the old beggar woman is very forthcoming with her help. This solidarity between a young woman and an old woman is very rare in most of the folktales since young women and old women are mostly pitted against each other. The young woman is hated for her beauty and the old woman is condescended upon because of her age, and her lack of youthful beauty. But ageing is a natural process, there is no harm or shame in ageing. In fact, age generally comes with a lot of experience and here one sees how the old beggar woman's experience is very helpful for the young and naïve Paneshoi who does not know of her mother's intentions until the beggar woman tells her about it.

It is noteworthy how Paneshoi is advised to take refuge in a boat on the pond and the hollow of a tree. Both the pond and the tree become a place of safety for her. The old widow and her son cannot reach Paneshoi when she is afloat on the pond or tucked in the hollow of a tree. Nature is seen here as a protector, a refuge, a place of safety and security for a woman. Nature respects her intention of not getting married, of keeping her identity as Paneshoi intact. Nature looks after Paneshoi's well-being by protecting her and keeping the old widow and the son at a distance on the bank of the pond.

In “the Cat's Daughter” too the cat relies on nature to communicate about her well-being to her daughters. When the daughters want to know how they can get across to her if anything untoward were to happen to their mother, the cat simply tells them to look for clues in nature:

As the cat's daughters grew up, one day they asked their mother “Mother, if anything bad happens to you, how would we come to know?” The cat gave a basil plant and a jar of milk to the girls and said, “If anything bad happens to me, then the basil plant will droop and the milk in the jar will turn black, then you go in search of me.” (trans. Bhagawati 12)

The drooping basil plant and the black milk would be indicators of the cat being in pain or danger. This becomes a beautiful illustration of nature reflecting the pain and suffering of the cat-mother. When the cat-mother could not communicate with her daughter, the basil plant and the milk in the jar would do so on their behalf. They would give her a voice and also communicate on her behalf, warn her daughters and make sure they got to know of her suffering.

In *Folktales of North East India* the first story “The Creation of River Brahmaputra” contains two legends about the creation of Brahmaputra River. The first legend reveals that the river has been referred to as a sister of the sun. Along with it, the tale also portrays certain indigenous beliefs regarding the creations of the earth. “Brahmaputra” faces several difficulties while moving on the earth. Due to her inability to cross the mountains, she starts living at Nimtubram¹⁶, the very end of the world. But, people in other parts start fainting as they do not get enough water. At that time, the animals such as cat and worm help humans to get water from the river. The story, here, represents the animistic belief where nature has been worshipped as a provider to the humans. The inclusion of animals in their folk tradition reveals the admiration of Assamese people of nature. It is very obvious to see how people had regarded river (nature) as a sister by giving it a feminine identity. Even in the popular imagination, Brahmaputra is seen as a “human” river with a life and pulse of her own. Moreover, the identification of the river Brahmaputra as a woman and a sister is a narrative that empowers both the river and women, who seem to be enjoying a complementary relationship here. The personal attachment to nature and the acknowledgement of how it empowers women has been beautifully captured by Susan Griffin:

The earth is my sister; I love her daily grace, her silent daring, and how loved I am how we admire this strength in each other, all that we have lost, all that we have suffered, all that we know; we are stunned by this beauty, and I do not forget: what she is to me, what I am to her. (219)

This section has attempted to bring into focus the strong concerns for women and nature through a closely related ideology, i.e. ecofeminism. For that, it has attempted to provide a reading claiming a

¹⁶*Nimtubram*: a great lake situated at the end of the earth.

non-binary vision of the domination of women and nature respectively. The analysis of the tales also helps people to understand the importance of women and nature and their correlation in order to stabilise the ecological order and also address ecological crisis. Even though the representations are fictional they do compel the readers to look into ecological concerns. In the present scenario the tradition of story-telling itself has been jeopardised. The culture which was once closely related with nature now is on the verge of extinction. This section has therefore tried to look at ways in which the relationship between women and nature can create a society that is more conscious of the ecological crises that plague it. It is hoped that a re-reading of women's relationship with nature in this chapter will bring about a greater consciousness of the intricate connection of women and ecology. The liberation of women and the liberation of ecology are like the two sides of the same coin.

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socio-economic relations and the underlying values of this society. (Ruether, 204)

CHAPTER: IV

Change and Continuity: A Reading Towards Women's Agency

Introduction

Change and continuity is one of the most significant features of a culture and a fundamental aspect in the progress of socio-cultural sphere of a community. It is not just a set of modifications processed on established traditions but also a continuous negotiation towards a broader social transition. Change and continuity is indeed a constant and common phenomenon of everyday life that not only occurs due to modernisation but it is a continuous process that allows people to bring stability and maintenance towards an equitable distribution of resources and power to each individual. This chapter explores the portrayal of women in Assamese folktales through the lens of change and continuity vis-a-vis the position of women. It will do so while engaging with the concept of women's agency, the power to act, take decisions, to build a better life for oneself. Feminist intervention has by now established that agency should not be seen through a binary lens of absence/presence, consent/coercion, and so on. This chapter takes cognizance of this intervention as it reads agency and ways in which resistance come about through the exercise of this agency that is characteristic of the women in select Assamese folktales.

BurhiAair Sadhu, as the title suggests, has folktales women have been associated with telling across generations. Not only in Bezbaroa's text, but across the spectrum of the storytelling tradition, the grandmother and women in general, are seen as carriers of this tradition. A.K. Ramanujan has also argued how women's tales can be regarded as a "counter-system," an "alternative way of looking at things" (53) that resist dominant androcentric discourses. Since most of the tales are told by women, it becomes important to understand whether they asserted their agency while telling and circulating those tales, even if implicitly. On the face of it, the portrayal of wicked and villainous step-mothers, murder and cutting up of women's bodies, the bartering of women's bodies by men and women both, the

marginalisation of beggar women seems to cut off the possibility of any agency adhering to women. But it is essential to acknowledge that everyone has access to agency even if they may not have as many options to exercise that agency as others. This chapter has thus sought to look at the ways in which women's agency is manifested in the folktales selected for the study, based on the belief that despite the horrific ways in which women are othered, women manifest some degree of agency. The telling of the tales in the first place can be read as a certain agency which women hold. They partake in the power of storytelling and this itself is something that gives them an agency.

In the feminist domain, the aspect of women's agency is undeniably a pivotal concern to understand the social construction of human subjectivity. It thus provides a way to see that how people in a society think and act in certain conditions. Women's agency challenges the radical continuation of women's subjugation, inequalities and domination of patriarchy through gender discrimination. The concept of agency or "the capacity and ability to act" (Hinterberger, 7) emerges from the theories of subjectivity and power which have been shaped by the constant repetition of historical, social and cultural knowledge. The early feminist works of agency primarily focused on the exclusion of women. Critics, such as Carol Gilligan, Katherine MacKinnon, Kathy Davis, Elizabeth Grosz have discussed about the various factors of society that depict women as a physically hindered category. Elizabeth Grosz in her book *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* addresses the binarism of social construction and argues that the body and the mind cannot be seen as separate identities; they belong to the same category. The age-old practice of associating men with cerebral activities and women with bodily activities has been re-assessed now. Judith Butler asserts that power (the construction) not only forms subjects and individuals but also sustains agency and existence. This is what she addresses as "the ambivalence of agency" (18).

Chandra Mahanty in her essay, "Under Western Eyes" has discussed that the idea of domination is a part of colonial ideology, where women of third world countries are determined as uneducated, traditionally bound and women of first world are educated and free from the gender pre-suppositions. This is also true in terms of "tradition" and "modernity" wherein women in "traditional" settings are

imagined to be suffering from a lack of agency while those in “modern” settings are assumed to be empowered and progressive. This kind of dichotomy between “tradition” and “modernity” in society pre-supposing a linear, rational and desirable move from one phase to another is what the arguments made in this chapter also contest. One cannot assume that societies changed for the better from being traditional to being modern; that women are much happier and secure now that they have formal education, or can earn money. Traditions continue in different ways, just as change marks our lives continuously. This chapter thus looks at how women negotiate this in the tales and how agency and resistance figure in their lives as implied in the tales.

This chapter also engages with the recent re-telling of tales from *Buri Aair Sadhu* done by Chandrica Barua. This is a brilliant illustration how women resist the ways in which they have been seen and delimited. Barua’s re-telling is inspired by her own relationship to the tales, through a personal lens. In re-telling the stories she sees herself, and other women and girls in a different light, thus resisting overarching definitions of women that had seemed to rule the roost for so long.

No Body-for-Others: Women’s Agency in Select Tales

While marriage has been seen as an unavoidable social obligation of sorts for women, the tale of “Kanchani” takes a different take on marriage through the figure of the protagonist Kanchani. Kanchani is a young and beautiful girl, and recently married to a young handsome boy who had earlier been cursed and turned into a dog (he later turns back into a man with the help of an old beggar woman). As a wife, she is shown as being completely obedient and devoted to her husband. But her happiness does not last long. The king of the village desires to marry her seeing she is so beautiful and proposes to her. Kanchani, however, rejects his proposal at once and eventually embraces death along with her husband. Kanchani’s refusal to oblige the king speaks volumes about her ability to take a stand against his overtures. She chooses death over what she considers disgrace and is ultimately able to assert her right to refuse the king’s proposal. Kanchani’s boldness seems to be remembered by her people even after her death. Even after the death of Kanchani and her husband, the couple is seen remain united. The smokes from their graves meet in the sky and mingle together as a form of eternal

love. Kanchani refuses to humour the king, chooses to reject his proposal knowing full well the consequences of her actions. She is not lured by material wealth the king has to offer and instead chooses to stay by her husband.

...the king approached Kanchani with all the comforts of his life and tried in different ways to persuade her to be his queen. But Kanchani remained adamant and could not be convinced. (trans. Barua 138)

When Konkani's husband is killed she too joins him in death by thrusting her body alongside her husband as he is killed. She refuses to let her body be controlled by the king or even by her husband who pleads her to go back home. Ultimately, she destroys her body—the body which the king wanted to own—and she is seen to have transcended her body as she becomes united with her husband in the form of smoke from their funeral pyre. Later, the king orders for two trees to be planted on the graves of Kanchani and her husband, a peepal and a banyan tree. As these two trees grow, they get entwined and start living as one. Even in her after-life as a tree Kanchani continues to defy the king as she is one with her husband.

In “Tit for Tat” too a young woman refuses to get married against her wishes and even manages to take revenge on the man who kidnaps her to marry her. The tale presents the theme of revenge in a different light through the figure of a young woman. The young woman is deceived by a thief who carries her away to marry her, enamoured of her beauty. The woman only gets to know this when the thief tells him he is not her brother (which he had earlier claimed to be) but a suitor who would not take no for an answer. The woman plans her escape and effectively gets away on a horse, tying the thief's mother up while he was away. The young woman then punishes the thief by cutting off his nose and handing him over to soldiers to be executed. She not only escapes from the thief, but also executes a fitting revenge against the thief, relying on her own agency and conviction that she would not be wrong in doing so.

“The story of Joymoti” refers back to the tyrannous reign of king Sulikpha (an Ahom king). There was a law that if a person was mutilated or had any sign of a cut on his body, he could not ascend to

the throne. As per the instruction of king Sulikpha, all the ministers of Ahom kingdom ordered their soldiers to get each and every Assamese man mutilated. This was done so that no one could come up and claim the throne. Prince Gadapani, the most eligible heir of Ahom kingdom, fled to *Naga Hills*¹⁷ to save himself from Sulikpha. After failing to search Gadapani, all the ministers called on his wife Joymoti and asked her about Gadapani's whereabouts. But, Joymoti did not open her mouth and said nothing about her husband. She was forced and tortured with hot water, thorny plants at *Jerenga Pathar*¹⁸. Eventually, after fourteen days of continuous physical torture, it brought her to the death. It was the time when prince Gadapani returned back and claimed his throne by defeating the king Sulikpha. Eventually, people started admiring Joymoti for her sacrifice and courage which ultimately brought peace and liberty to the Ahom kingdom.

“The story of Joymoti” is the most celebrated story of women's endurance in Assam. Joymoti is also known as ‘Sati Joymoti’ because of her valiant act to keep her husband safe from the royalists. Throughout the history of Assam, she is still remembered as a patriot and a national idol among Assamese people. Moreover, Joymoti has also been recognised as an ideal wife and an idol of female virtues. In the story, Joymoti is shown as a dutiful but mentally strong woman who has made her ultimate sacrifice to save her people:

Prince Gadapani, the most obvious heir of Ahom kingdom, fled to Naga hill to save himself. After failing to search Gadapani, all the ministers called on his wife Joymoti and started asking about Gadapani's whereabouts. But, Joymoti did not open her mouth and said nothing about her husband. (trans. Dihingia,64)

Joymoti knew that her husband was the only hope and had to stay alive to build the future of Ahom kingdom. Her selfless love, courage, sacrifice and patriotism made her an ideal heroine in Assamese history and as an immortal persona in the heart of people. Though one sees the reiteration of the trope of self-sacrifice and selfless love for the husband, one also sees Joymoti thinking not only as a wife, but as a person responsible for safeguarding the future of her people and freeing them from the

¹⁷ Naga Hills: a place lies in the border of India and Burma.

¹⁸ JerengaPathar: A place of Assam where Joymoti was tortured to death.

clutches of a megalomaniac like the king Sulikpha. She thinks like a true leader and holds the fort when her husband is away, never flinches at the prospect of punishment, looks death in the eye even as she continues to protect her husband despite all the torture she is subjected to. Joymoti's silence is one that is permeated with agency, she doesn't beg for mercy or give in, despite being violently threatened and harmed.

In the tale of "Tejimola" even after Tejimola is killed by her step-mother she re-appears as a plant and continues to live her life, if only in a different form:

After some days, a plant of bottle-gourd sprouts grew above the soil where Tejeemola was buried. It bore nice fruits. On the other hand when the neighbours did not see Tejeemola for many days, they enquired of the step-mother about her. The step-mother replied. "Tejeemola has not returned from her friend's home yet." (Kashyap 39)

Many bodily transformations take place as she changes from a human to a bottle-gourd tree, a citrus tree, and ultimately a lotus, before turning human again. This power to change from one life-form to another, this power to adapt, and the power to survive speaks volumes about Tejimola's agency as a person who thrives in nature. Even when Tejimola is not in her human form, she has a voice, she can speak up, defend herself, and ultimately live to tell the tale of her "death" at the hands of her step-mother. Death no longer holds any material meaning for Tejimola as she transcends even death. In a way, Tejimola's transformations are also a metaphor for the way in which living organisms live, grow and decompose to give way to other organisms within an eco-system. In nature, life is sustained through death. This is beautifully illustrated through Tejimola's transformations in the story. Tejimola's being changed back into a girl, into a human body also re-affirms her agency as a woman with a body that has been through so much and a body that can survive, a body that is no longer weak, frail, or vulnerable.

In the tale "Tula and Teja" Teja's mother is turned into a turtle after she is cursed by her co-wife. But she changes from a turtle to a hibiscus plant and a citrus tree to look after her children. This power to adapt to any situation signified by these changes points to her agency as a mother. Motherhood has

been associated with agency and power in women to look after their children, to help them grow, help them secure a good future. It is a well-known fact that mothering is no easy task. Teja's mother seems to rise to the occasion, as it were, as she gets transformed into trees that bear flowers and fruits. Her children find shelter under the trees, they find shelter in her. It is when Teja is sheltered by her mother, when she is under her watch that the king sees her and longs to marry her. Though the king sees Teja perhaps only as a beautiful girl, this meeting becomes pivotal in their lives. Teja's getting married to the king also means her sufferings at the hands of her step-mother would finally come to an end. Teja's tree-mother or mother-tree thus watches over her as she grows into a sensible young girl:

A citrus tree and a hibiscus tree grew in the area where they had buried the two limbs of the turtle. The hibiscus tree started to grow with lots of beautiful and charming flowers and the citrus tree was full of fruit. Teja and Kanai sat below the two trees to take rest and thus talked to their mother at the same time while tending to the cows. (trans. Saikia 76)

As a tree or trees, Teja's mother is beyond the pale of her villainous co-wife's influence. As a tree she is almost invincible. The same can be said of Tejimola who refuses to go away or die even after she is killed by her step-mother. This power, this agency seems to have come from these women's association with the plant world with trees which are not bothered by the world and its upheavals:

Apart from the weather—not its forecast, mind you, that comedy show on television—the plant world was indifferent to every occurrence, man-made or natural, outside the locality of its amphitheatre. (Roy 11)

In Tejimola's case, the transformation of her being from lotus to human seems to suggest how she has been able to connect with her true self and agency as a tree and how that is what would sustain her now as a human being.

In many tales the old beggar women who help men and women deal with their problems and suggest time-tested mechanisms to address any issue also point to the knowledge these women possessed. In "Paneshoi" when the old woman comes to know that six women in a household are

controlled by their brother-in-law who calls all the shots in the household, she speaks out vehemently against such an unheard-of tyranny:

“What are you saying? When all six of you women are at home, how can this young boy become the master of the house? I haven’t ever heard or seen anything like this,” said the old woman. The sister-in-law replied “Well sister, this is true. Our husbands have entrusted the entire responsibilities of the household upon him. What can we do?” The old woman understood what was in their minds and told them, “You fool! If you want to be mistresses of the house, then listen to what I say.” (trans. Barua 136)

The beggar women cannot conceive of the fact that all six women have been taking instructions from the youngest brother-in-law. Upon enquiring about this she finds these women have been doing so at the behest of their husbands. Even though the women don’t say it out loud, they want to get rid of the youngest brother-in-law. The old beggar woman immediately understood what they had in mind and proceeds to tell them what they can do to better their situation. There is a tacit understanding between the old beggar woman and these women who seem to know one others’ minds without speaking their thoughts out loud. The old beggar woman then proceeds to tell them how they can trick him and turn him into a dog and get rid of him and their problems all at once.

The house is seen as a place where women should be able to take decisions and not just simply take instructions. It is seen as a space which women reclaim through the help of the old beggar woman.

Moreover, the fact that these beggar women are sometimes old and ugly also points to how standards of beauty and youth do not in a sense apply to them. They can tap into their intelligence and potential for problem-solving to tackle issues which women are otherwise seen as ill-equipped to tackle.

The poverty of these “beggar” women is not seen as a hindrance to them. In fact, they are in the company of rich and powerful men even if they are poor and material wealth does not really hamper their faculties. Much like the poor woman in Suniti Namjoshi’s fable “The Debt” who gives shelter to

a prince during a stormy night, they know what they are capable of and that their poverty is never a hindrance to living a fulfilling life. In Namjoshi's "The Debt" the poor widow saves a prince by sheltering him, the queen wonders if she is in the beggar woman's debt and she struggles with this question for long. When she finally meets the poor widow she is told that she can never pay or compensate the beggar woman for her kindness because there are just too many of them and it rains very often. The idea that the rich do not have any real leverage over the poor that is explored here also attaches itself to the representation of the beggar women in the tales.

Resistance as Everyday Practice: Women's Resistance in Select Tales

Resistance in this section of the chapter is premised on the understanding that resistance is not just about organised action, shouting out loud from rooftops, but an everyday practice which is embedded in the narratives of Assamese folktales. This section thus proceeds with the understanding that resistance is an everyday practice that "cannot be reduced solely to the conscious and organized political action of defiance but instead describes an everyday practice that is shaped and motivated by people's attempts to find their own political, social and cultural positioning" (Harcourt, et al. 6). This section also takes cognizance of the argument that resistance is carried out in many ways. There is not one way of "doing resistance" just as there is no one way of "doing gender":

... there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. (Foucault 96)

Likewise, in the tales that are discussed in this section, some like Barua resist in ways that are interested and necessary, some like Rani the princess resist in ways that are violent. Laagi's resistance is sacrificial, she continues to look after her children as fruit and flower-bearing trees, Tejimola's resistance is at once improbable and solitary. The step-mother who killed her finds it improbable that she would continue to "live." Her resistance is solitary in that she has no human ally but nature

becomes her greatest strength and ally. When women take on the forms of animals like that of the elephant and the horses, their resistance to received ideas of their bodies become at once sacrificial and possible. Resistances thus figure in different configurations in the tales discussed.

The re-reading of folktales and re-telling of folktales is also a form of resistance that this dissertation has engaged with. Chandrica Barua's re-reading and re-telling of some tales from Bezbaroa's *Buri Aair Sadhu* is invaluable to this section. In her project titled *Stories by the Fire on a Winter Evening: Assamese Folktales Read and Re-Told* Barua looks back on tales from her childhood, aware of the change and continuity in Assamese society in general and in her own perception of herself as she has grown as an individual affected by the waves of change and continuity. What that leads to is Barua's attempt to re-visit and re-read the tales from her childhood and resist through her re-telling of these tales. This gives an insight into how women see themselves in the stories and how they also see they have the potential to resist. This section will thus read into both Barua's re-tellings and re-read other tales that this dissertation has taken up for study.

In the earlier version of the tale "The Kite's Daughter" there is vehement jealousy and rivalry between the co-wives and the kite's daughter. Barua tries to contextualise the disgruntlement of the co-wives by stating they only wanted the kite's daughter to contribute to the work, insisting on equitable distribution of labour. She also stresses that they express this not because they want to fight with the kite's daughter but because they want to live together as "sisters" without any disharmony. This sisterhood that Barua introduces speaks of solidarity and understanding between women, a resistance to overarching ideas of women's animosity towards one another predicated upon their desire to please a man. The tale also states how boy-child preference in was an "anomaly and not a norm" (19). The kite's daughter chooses to become a potter, taking up a profession instead of staying on as the potter's newest wife. In doing so, she initiates the process of self-actualisation when she decides it is better for her to leave.

In the earlier version, towards the end of the tale the kite's daughter is overjoyed to be found by her husband again as she sings of her predicament and she decides to go back with him:

Coincidentally the merchant was returning home from town by the same river by which she was signing. He heard the song and saw his wife there. He asked her what happened and she told him her whole story and broke down into tears. The merchant then took his wife with him in a covered basket. He decided to teach his other seven wives a lesson. (trans. Duarah 70)

In Barua's re-telling, the kite's daughter is happy her husband finds her but she remembers the way she had always had to prove herself at his home. She starts to wonder if her well-being would be jeopardised by agreeing to go back with her husband:

One day, the merchant was passing by the area and heard the song. He recognised his wife's voice. He called out to her and kept looking around till his voice reached the kite's daughter. In joy, she was about to call back when she remembered her days at his house. Having to prove herself again and again, his ill-treatment of the other wives and his anger at her when he thought she had failed. What if he gets another wife? Will she be treated the way the other wives had been?

She could not go back. She wanted to be free again and loved purely as her mother did. (17-18)

Choosing her freedom and well-being over pleasing the merchant, the kite's daughter refuses to go back. Her refusal to go back also saves the other co-wives from being punished for their cruelty towards her. In the earlier version, the merchant goes back home and kills his wives by preparing a pit filled with harpoons and sharp weapons into which they fall. Thus, the decision the kite's daughter takes is good for her and also for the other co-wives who continue to live on.

In re-telling the tale "Tula Aru (and) Teja" Barua gives it the title "A Tale of Two Sisters Undone by Fate." Barua re-imagines the relationship between the rival sisters as one of "intimacy, sisterhood and love" (34). Her tale states that Tula was continuously manipulated and exploited by her mother to betray her sister Teja and replace her as the king's wife. In the earlier version, Tula herself asks Teja for her jewellery so she can have them. She is complicit in her mother's plans to turn Teja into a bird

so she could take Teja's place as the queen in the palace. Tula's mother sticks a hairpin into her head while pretending to comb her hair and check for lice and she turns into a bird:

On the day after this incident, when the king sent the palanquin bearers to bring back Teja, the step mother of Teja made Tula wear the clothes and ornaments of Teja and decorated her beautifully like Teja and sent Tula to the king's house. Tula looked almost similar to Teja. Thus the king didn't find out the truth. (trans. Saikia 82)

In "A Tale of Two Sisters Undone by Fate" Tula who loves Teja dearly is shocked when she comes to know of her mother's intentions:

Tula was very shocked to see this and accused her mother. Laagi threatened to turn her into a frog if she didn't as she was asked. Tula was very scared of her mother and often gave in to her demands. Next day, when the king sent his palanquin to bring Teja back to the palace, Laagi sent Tula instead of Teja. She dressed Tula up in Teja's clothes and jewellery and made her look just like Teja. (30-31)

Tula is abused by her jealous mother and her absent father and she fails to throw off the yoke of her mother's influence. Though the two sisters love each other dearly it is fate which comes in the way of their relationship. While one is killed by the king in a gruesome manner, the other sister falls into a "comatose sickness" (34) because of her grief and loss. When the king finds out Tula has taken Teja's place he orders for her to be murdered and cut into pieces. Barua's narrative does not do away with this part, but explicitly suggests the king was wrong in doing so, blinded by his rage. In the earlier version of the tale, Teja goes back to being the king's wife and living "happily ever after" with him. In Barua's version, Teja is so grieved at Tula's punishment and death that she falls seriously ill and there is no "happily ever after" awarded to anybody. The narrative thus problematises and resists this narrative of a "happy ending" that seems to be guaranteed by the brutal punishment and murder of a woman in what seems to be a war between women.

The tale of the woman or princess who is kidnapped by a thief is re-told as a coming-of-age story of a young woman who had been mollycoddled, sheltered from the harsh realities of the world and infantilised in Barua's version. The earlier version entitled "Put Kharoni on your Chopped-off Nose" is changed into "The Princess who Saved Herself." It conveys the clear message that the otherwise fragile princess is empowered enough to save herself. In Barua's version, the princess who is a "Sweet and Simple Rani" goes on to be called a "Brave and Bold Rani" (41). The princess, or Rani, resists being taken by her "brother" in the first instance unwilling to believe she had a brother because she was an orphan and had no living relatives in the world. However the queen-mother insists she oblige her "brother" and that she leave with him.

The princess, while she is away from the palace realises she has to come to her own rescue. She has to be her own "knight on a white horse" and so she takes it upon herself to do something about her kidnapper. Not only does she escape him but she also manages to ride back home on one of his horses, a powerful visual reversal of the "knight on a white horse who saves the princess" trope.

Moreover, the princess later identifies the thief, cuts his nose off and sprinkles acidic *kharoni* on his nose which gives him more pain. The infantilisation and "protection" of women by authoritative elders is what we also see being resisted here, apart from the resistance the princess herself puts up against all these ideas that have tried to render her helpless and fragile.

The demonising of women and punishing them as witches is prominent in most tales like "The Legend of a Woman" and "the Infertile Mother." It is important to mention here as the writer Hem Barua sums up, "she (Assam) is known, outside her borders, mostly as a land of witchcraft and magic, animism and wild tribes" (qtd. in Jogesh Das, *Folklore of Assam*, and 41). The collapsing of women with the state of Assam and the characterisation of Assam as a place where witchcraft and black magic illuminates one's understanding of the demonisation of women in the tales. However, as has already been discussed, there is no rational justification for this witch hunting of sorts. This kind of irrationality has been resisted within the tale itself. The fear that is generated by these women, whether

they were actually witches or not, is real though. It can also be argued that if women did possess occult powers, they were feared and people did make efforts to pacify them through rituals and offerings.

Another form of resistance that surfaces in the tales is women's refusal to see themselves merely as bodies and objects. They seem to be asking the pertinent question "why should our bodies end at the skin?" (Haraway 220). The discourse of the body is therefore extended beyond the skin, women are much more than their bodies. This seems to manifest itself in tales like that of Jayamala who becomes an elephant and finds happiness, and excels as a leader of elephants; in the tale of Tejimola where she takes on different life-forms as plants and trees. Teja's mother turns into a flowering tree and a fruit-bearing tree and still watches over her children. Kanchani continues to live on as a peepal tree and is re-united with her husband even after her human form is no more. This resistance to the body as a construct is a potent form of resistance seen in the tales. Moreover, the identification with trees that Sumana Roy talks about in her book *How I Became A Tree* seems to be at work here too where women and plants and trees become one. One sees resistance beautifully mediated and consolidated by nature in the tales:

I sometimes wonder why so many leaves are heart shaped. In poems or moments as short-lived as poems themselves, I have seen the heart move, walk, the entire being turned into this organ that controls life. When I chance upon heart-shaped leaves—and there are too many to name, from the betel leaf to the raspberry—I have the sense of my insides turned out for me to see. I will never know why the walnut resembles the human brain, beans the kidney, bhindis human fingers, and so on. There must be—I want to believe—some relation, even if it is only imaginary... how wonderful it is, I told myself, that I, with my heart and brain and kidneys, am composed of plant parts already. (28-29)

CHAPTER: V

Conclusion

This dissertation has attempted to explore the complexities underlying the representation of women in Assamese folktales of the Ahom community. “Classic” tales like those found in Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s *Burhi Aair Sadhu* have been read along with some of these tales re-told from a feminist perspective. These have been complemented with readings of tales collected from people the researcher has met and interviewed. The reading has been done through the lens of feminist and ecofeminist interventions in gender studies. It has been done taking into consideration the over-emphasis on women as bodies that are othered and marginalised. However, it has also engaged with how these very “othered” bodies have an agency of their own. Women’s resistance of patriarchal overtures have also been considered in the dissertation.

The introductory chapter has engaged with definitions of the term ‘folktales’ and attempted to see how they share an integral relationship with ‘myths’ and ‘legends’. Apart from that, it has briefly described the primary sources along with research objectives, questions and methodologies that have been taken in the process of analysis. The second chapter of this dissertation has mainly discussed the emergence of folk culture in Assam. It has also highlighted the academic, historical and contemporary development of folktales in the Assamese society. Examining the value of folktales, this chapter has attempted to analyse the various functions of folktales in a society. However, for a productive research, the concept of ‘ecofeminism’ has been taken up to describe the association of women and nature in the realm of select folktales. In this regard, stories, such as “The Tale of The Cat’s Daughter”, “Ow Kuwari”, “Tejimola”, “Tula and Teja”, “The Tale of the Kite’s Daughter”, “The Legend of Jayamala”, “The Creation of River Brahmaputra”, “The White Horse” have been examined to understand the purpose of the research.

The third chapter of this research has begun with the concept of 'gender' (ideologies) and its implications on different categories of people, i.e. male, female. This chapter has discussed the representations of women in Assamese folktales. Portraying women as an object of male possession, it has exhibited certain practices, i.e. polygamy, matricides, as desired in the society. The chapter has also made an attempt to scrutinise the various bodily transformations of women into non-human entities through the concept of 'body politics'. In some stories, they are shown as a kind mothers, dutiful and loyal wives, obedient daughters and carriers of traditional knowledge of a society. On the other hand, there are evil step-mothers, evil co-wives and witches who are cast in villainous roles.

The dissertation has also discussed the change and continuity as a dynamic process of culture and society. It is a common phenomenon of human civilisation that occurs in a society to reshape the thoughts and perceptions of individuals with the passage of time. This chapter exhibits the socio-cultural transitions of the society in the lives of Assamese women. However, it has examined the agency of Assamese women in the select folktales which seem to defy the conventional patriarchal norms. Stories like "Kanchani", "Tit for Tat", "The Story of Joymoti" personify the women resilience through the women characters. On the other hand, feminist consciousness in Assamese society has been a crucial observation in this chapter, and has also been seen as manifested in these tales. This consciousness comes about in the manifestation of agency and in the plurality of resistances put forward by the women in the tales.

After the close analysis of primary texts, it has come to be observed that the depiction of women in the select folktales have rendered them as submissive and docile. In most of the tales women are taken to task for being infertile or inadequate or not beautiful enough. However, men and their choices are never questioned. A man's desire for many wives, his proprietary attitude towards women, acts of physical violence and gory murder of women are hardly interrogated. The disturbing recurrence of blood and gore in terms of the physical torture and punishment of women is especially disconcerting. The most horrendous of these bloody murders is the murder and cutting up of Tula. Tula's body parts are sent to her parents who eat them for dinner. This particular incident is so violent and hard to forget.

Even Barua in her re-telling of the tale decides not to omit it is since it is “one of the enduring images of the story” (33). Barua however points to the gross injustice of this in her narrative.

While examining the tales, it was also observed that women and nature are given the same attributes and regarded as one entity. Most of the tales depict a metaphorical connection between both entities to symbolise the spiritual communion between them. Women have been portrayed as a companion of nature on one hand; whereas nature has been epitomised through female characteristics. Stories like, “Tejimola”, “Tula and Teja”, “The Tale of the Kite’s Daughter” explores the pluralistic features of women and nature. In most tales it is evident that the oppression of both women and nature is similar, as it seems to emerge from the same patriarchal ideologies that dominate every universal object. Taking cue from the concept ‘ecofeminism’, this study has attempted to imagine a space where women and nature have been placed in the same position. Thus, when women get oppressed and victimised in the hands of patriarchy, it affects nature too. For example, when Tejimola is changed into agourd-plant, she too feels the same pain the bottle-gourd is subjected to when humans pluck gourds from her:

“Don’t extend your hand, don’t pluck gourd,

From where have you come old beggar?

My step mother pounded me for the silk clothes

I am Tejeemola only” (trans. Kashyap 40)

The tales, apart from the victimisation of women, have also depicted the issue of women’s resilience. Some women characters of the texts have emerged as an epitome of bravery and strength. Tales like “Kanchani”, “Tit for Tat”, “Put Kharoni on your Chopped-off Nose” and “The story of Joymoti” have exhibited women’s agency through which they assert themselves. Kanchani refuses to marry a king, Rani the princess takes revenge on her kidnapper by cutting off his nose, Joymoti refuses to be intimidated by the king and his threatening men who torture her.

This research has also kept in mind the adaptation of different world-views, conducts and cultural values in a society with the passing of time. The last chapter on change and continuity has especially been guided by this premise. It has looked at how women in the folktales and in the society mirrored in those tales have come to find solidarity and strength in each other and in nature, to effect self-actualisation in both tales that have been told and “re-told”.

Since time immemorial women have been described and limited by their bodies and bodily functions. They have been made to embody motherhood, reproduction, domesticity, docility without question. The issue of choice had been cruelly cut off from them. The dissertation has tried to problematise this in the context of the folktales taken up in the study. Starting off with the argument that women’s bodies are “other” bodies, it has sought to look at ways in which these “other” bodies have resisted with the agency inherent in them. It has attempted to argue how women’s relationship with nature has consolidated this agency and resistance in everyday life.

Though Assam is home to many communities and languages this dissertation has only analysed the folktales of the Ahom community. This has been one of the limitations of the research in terms of scope, mainly due to time constraints. More folktales could have been collected for the research, but the pandemic and the fear surrounding it proved to be an impediment. Some people who were approached did not want to share details of the folktales like the one involving the infertile woman who was believed to haunt the village as a ghost. They were afraid of repeating the tale and invoking the woman lest she came back to haunt them. This made me realise first-hand how folktales continue to inform their lives, and our lives. Moreover, in the collection of tales, it was felt more time needed to be devoted to interaction with the people being interviewed and met for the tales. That would have put them at ease perhaps and made them more comfortable but time was a deterrent here too. Further research could be conducted on the representation of gender in Assamese folktales while considering how men figure in these tales. The politics of masculinity and how it unfolds in the tales can be taken up. There are many instances of hyper masculinity also in the tales where violence seems to be the order of the day. Furthermore, the relationship between men, masculinity and nature in the folktales

can be looked into in future research. It is hoped that this dissertation will be able to open up discourses surrounding a more egalitarian approach to gender and gender relations in and through folktales which constitute and inform our lived realities.

Annexure

The following tales were collected and translated into English for the purpose of the research.

1. Legend of a woman

Place: Machkhowa, Pualmoni Gaon

Narrator: Gomeswar Dihingia

Age: 75

The story was collected from Pualmoni Gaon, Machkhowa. People of Pualmoni village believe that a spirit of a woman appeared at night few years ago. This phenomenon was interpreted by many people who heard a cry from a distant place. It was believed that the spirit was lurking to take vengeance on the people who were responsible for her death.

The story unfolded a mystery of a murder where a woman had hanged herself after being accused of a crime (that being something related to black magic). Her husband and his relatives started torturing her when her nine months old daughter was ill. She was badly beaten for something that she never did (according to her). After some days passed, she lost her hope and hanged herself.

People thought that it was her end. But, (as per the villagers) her spirit started appearing at different places of the village. She cried for her daughter. Terrified by the spirit, the villagers had performed some rituals to get rid of her. The nights became so scary for them and the place where the woman's body was cremated became a hostile place.

However, a year later, the woman's spirit was believed to have disappeared after her daughter's death.

From then on, she was never heard and spotted anywhere.

2. The story of 'Boga Ghura' (white horse)

Place: Dhakuakhana, Koronga Gaon

Narrator: Jeuti Bharali

Age: 45

The tale of 'Boga Ghura' or the white horse is that of a divine woman, who disguised herself as a white horse. It is believed that in the jungle of Koronga Gaon, there lived a white horse a long time ago. This tale is a familiar tale in many parts of Assam. People thought that the white horse was the saviour of the people from the evil spirits and was a divine woman who had turned into a horse due to her misdeeds. There are many instances where locals claimed to see the white horse at the night.

In the village, the horse was considered as the guard who looked after the people losing their ways in the night. She guided everyone who had suffered the dreaded contact with bad spirits. However, when the white horse appears in dreams, it is considered to be a good sign for that person.

The story of the white horse is still renowned in the village and people greatly honour this legend.

3. Black Magic

Place: Dhemaji Town, Assam

Narrator: Pankaj Mili

Age: 26

The story highlights the practice of black magic at Dhemaji Town, Assam. The narrator has presented an anecdote of a mysterious woman (name was not mentioned) who performs black magic. In her house, people claimed to see certain tools and elements related to magic practice. They have witnessed and heard mysterious events and unknown cries, such as women's voice, and shadowy figures. On the other hand, the narrator has also stated about 'love potion' (a spell that help people to get their love). Girls fall in love with boys instantly, boys fall in love with girls even after so many rejections.

Few years ago, two people disappeared when they were investigating the truth of this story. People assume that it might be the woman who came to know about them. Locals do not dare to talk about it and warn whoever comes to the place.

4. The Legend of Kamakhya

Place: Guwahati, Kamrup district

Popular myth

The legend of Kamakhya originates from the Nilachal Hill, Guwahati. It is related with Hindu mythology. 'Kamakhya' is also known as 'the bleeding goddess'.

This temple holds the record of 'Sati', wife of lord 'Shiva'. After her father's humiliating Lord Shiva, Sati got angry and sacrificed herself into the fire; when Lord Shiva heard the news, he took her on his shoulder like a mad man and performed his dance 'Tandava'. When lord 'Vishnu' saw lord Shiva's rage, he assumed that it might destroy the world at once and started cutting Sati's body for the sake of the world. All the parts of Sati's body that fell in different places came to be known as 'Sakti Peeths'. The temple of 'Kamakhya' was known to be special because the genital part of Sati had fallen in that place. But, this temple does not have any idol or a statue like in other religious places. Here, a stone is curved as a shape of female genitalia to worship goddess 'Kamakhya'.

People who come to this temple worship Kamakhya Devi. Because of the fallen genital part, it is believed that this temple has the cure for women's infertility.

5. The story of 'Joymoti'

Place: Shivsagar district

Historical tale

The story of Joymoti is a historical chronicle of Ahom (Assamese) community. It is the most significant example of women endurance and courage in Assam. This legend also exemplifies the era of Ahom kingdom and their orthodox tradition.

In the era of Ahom kings, there was a law that if a person is mutilated or has any sign of cut on his body, he cannot take the place of a king. So, under the suggestion of SulikphaRaja (king), all the ministers of Ahom kingdom ordered their soldiers to get each and every Assamese man to be mutilated, so that, no one could come up and claim the throne.

Prince Gadapani, the most obvious heir of Ahom kingdom, fled to Naga hill to save himself. After failing to search Gadapani, all the ministers called on his wife Joymoti and started asking about Gadapani's whereabouts. But, Joymoti did not open her mouth and said nothing about her husband. She was forced and tortured with hot water, thorny plants at JerengaPathar (a place where Joymoti was tortured). But, after fourteen days of physical torture, she faced death.

It was the time when prince Gadapani returned back and claimed his throne by defeating king Sulikpha. Eventually, people started admiring Joymoti for her sacrifice and courage which ultimately brought liberty to the Assamese people.

6. The story of Behula

Local lore

The story highlights the inner strength and power of a woman. It is an old story which falls under the region of Bengal and is hugely popular in Assam as well.

It starts with the protagonist, Behula, and the snake goddess 'Manasha'. When Behula's father-in-law (Chand merchant) refused to invoke the goddess, Manasha, she warns him that if he dared to do that she would definitely kill his seven sons. Despite Manasha's warning, he did not offer praying to her and as a result, found all his seven sons dead one by one. But, the wife of the youngest son Lakhinder, Behula could not accept her husband's death and went out to save him. She had crossed many mountains and river valleys and finally reached to the heaven. She begged the goddess Manasha to give her husband's life back and in return she would offer puja (prayings) with her father-in-law. After hearing her, the goddess Manasha gave Lakhinder's life back and blessed her for their future.

7. Story of an infertile mother

Place: Jorkata

Source: Bhadrawati Lahan

Age: 40

This is a story about a woman who tried to steal infants from their mother at night. The legend is very popular at Jorkata Gaon, Dhemaji. Long ago, there lived a couple who was childless. They had tried their best to get a child; but still it was of no use. People silently mocked them for not having a child. The couple was so kind to the children and often gave them fruits or something to eat. But, the parents did not like it and suggested their children to not to go and eat whatever the couple offered. After having humiliations for years, the couple finally decided to take help from black magic and luckily, they got a child. But, after a few months, unfortunately the baby died. It was the time when the couple nearly got mad and angry. They left the village and went out somewhere. People thought that the woman got miserable and jumped in the river.

However, the departure of the couple made the villagers happy. It only lasted for some months. The villagers claimed that after their disappearance, toddlers got sick and acted abnormally at night. Doctors could not detect any disease within their bodies. Sometimes, the mother had dreamt a dream where a woman comes and takes the baby. From then on, it started happening to each mother. For the sake of the child, the mother had to make rituals, invoked deities to save her child from bad spirits and eventually, things became normal.

The legend was very popular in Jorkata village and people still believe in it. So, whenever a child is born, the parent first makes rituals to save their child from evil spirits.

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