



**PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN ASSAMESE PROVERBS: A FEMINIST
PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract:

Gender perspective has taken a mere eloquent place in the academic realm of folklore studies. Proverbs are part of oral folklore that delineates the elements of the culture of a society. Patriarchy and proverbs are interrelated to create gender identity. Proverbs create a feminine identity where women are portrayed as responsible for domestic work and men as responsible for going outside and getting income. Most of the proverbs depict the status of women in Assamese society. In this paper, an analysis has been made on the portrayal of women in Assamese proverbs.

Keywords: *Assamese society, Gender, Proverbs, women, identity*

3.1 INTRODUCTION:

Proverbs are part of oral folklore that delineates the elements of the culture of a society. Proverbs are traditional axiom that present facts based on everyday observation. The proverbs depend on the context and social reality of that particular society. According to read write think; proverbs are diminutive and easy to bear in mind, sometimes it has peculiar elucidations according to their context. Mieder says “A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation” (2004:119). For example, early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise. Proverbs are

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used as a tool to reinforce gendered norms. Gender refers to the social role divisions and perception of the roles, wishes and desires that men and women take on. Gendered norms are socially and culturally constructed chauvinist norms and behaviors associated with males and females. This essay aims to analyze the representation of women in Assamese proverbs.

Assam is the gateway of northeast India that is full of diversity. Assamese society is a mixture of both tribal and non-tribal cultures. Like other states in India, Assamese society is also a patriarchal society that's reflected in the Assamese folk culture. Assamese folklore showcases the social reality, the way of life of Assamese people. Proverbs are a mere important part of Assamese folklore which are known as *fokora jujuna*, *dakor boson*, *prabad*. Proverbs are a medium to spread moral advice in Assamese society. *Dakor bosons* are those sentences that reflect the morals and truth of a society that is based on everyday experience. In Assam, *Dakor boson* originated by Dak Purusha who was born in Lihi Donra village of Barpeta, Assam. *Dakor bosons* are related to agriculture, rain, womanhood also (Rahman, 2017).

3.2 FEMINIST UNDERSTANDING OF ASSAMESE PROVERBS:

According to Schipper (2010), proverbs reflect the social beliefs regarding gender and by looking at the proverbs in a particular language or culture of a community one can know how gender is perceived in that society. He also mentioned that the basic themes for the proverbs are derived from elementary human experiences and activities of everyday life. Feminist folklorist focused on women's lives and their status in a particular society (Nicole, 1999). Radical feminist Kate Millet (1969) argued that, patriarchy enforces taboo against women through myth and religion, myths and traditions are based on men's experiences. Most of the proverbs depict discrimination against women.

3.3 CULTURAL TRANSMISSION THROUGH KNOWLEDGE:

Post-modern thinker Michal Foucault said that knowledge create power to control a society and construct norms and beliefs. Power exercises through knowledge. He also states that if persons have more knowledge than that person will able to control a society (collected from Routledge). Foucault (1975:135-138) also says that body is shaped to behave in a certain way. According to author discipline is a strategy to create politics between bodies. Discipline creates hegemony to control bodies by using historic and practice of control. Proverbs is historical and cultural practice that creates discipline and docile body where female body



represents as inferior to man. Proverbs are used to transmit traditional knowledge generation to generation. Here folklore is production of knowledge which shows the reality, norms and customs of a society. Folklore has not emerged in one particular time it develops with oral tradition, generation by generation. But in the reality is the knowledge of folklore creating a gendered society where male and female has been playing their role according to their gender. According to radical feminist Kate Millet (1969:46), argued that patriarchy enforce taboo against women through myth and religion, like millet saying in folklore of Assamese also enforces taboo or patriarchal subordination to women. Proverb like “lau dangor holew pator tol”(Deka, 2019: 52) use to define the status of women as inferior. Here “*lau dangor holew*” means that maybe the women doing a prestigious job, higher educated or self-establish but ultimately she need protection from men and under the subordination of men.

3.4 GENDER SOCIALIZATION THROUGH TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE:

Through the socialization process, youngsters become aware of the rules of society as children learn cultural and religious values. Family, Society, Folklore has big contribution to this socialization process of the child. Proverbs help children to know about the cultural pattern and lifestyle of the society. Patriarchy uses it as a tool to create gender identity; because Patriarchy and proverbs are interrelated to create gender identity. Proverbs help to create a feminine identity where women are portrayed as responsible for domestic work and men as responsible for going outside and getting income.

Ji nari provate nidra jai

Bahi hajat sui jai kopai

Udai kalot nilipe ghar

Dakem bule koriba hela

The above mention proverb emphasizes the domestic work of women in a house if women have those qualities than she is an ideal women and she has deserve respect. Through this kind of socialization women are aware about duties like wake up at the early morning and do all household work properly. Through folktales also women internalize how to behave in



particular manner. Ideal women are those who always wake up early and doing all household work, their behavior depicted as passive, soft, loyal, carrying etc.

Giri jai porot Tiri thake gharat.

(The man/ husband work in outside) and the women/ wife work in inside).(Source: Deka, 2019:53).

These proverbs reflect the sexual division of labor in Assamese society. Women are responsible for household works and men are the bread earner of the family.

3.5 WHO IS IDEAL WOMAN?:

Ideal women or men are those who follow the rules of society. Proverbs delineate what qualities make a woman an ideal woman. It has been shown in proverbs that it is necessary to be feminine in order to be an ideal woman. Like;

“swāmika puje godholi rāti, sehisenārilaksmijāti”

(Who worships her husband all day and night,/ She is the woman of Lakshmi’s class)

“khangata swāmiye kare dhikkār hena dekhi ki chono boleār. Namra hoiyā thāke jehena dāshi sajala nayan anāhike hāshi”.

(If husband condemns her in anger, / Looking at this, says nothing. As humble as a slave, / Wet eyes with no smile) (Dutta, 2016: 40).

Both of these proverbs depicts women who worship her husband like god, if she tolerates his anger or domestic violence with silently then she is a good women and good wife.

“olāi jāi nāhe son kāle, sei dustā stree bule sakale. Jito stree rasadāyaāula bāula kesa, sadāya kandala kare ni sesa”.

(Goes out and does not return soon, / She is called bad woman by all. Woman with untidy hair, / Destroys everything by always quarrelling.)

“Jar gharat mata muwa tiri; Tar gharat nai cirri”. (Borgohain, 2020:38).



The girls who live like boys are called Matamuwa (manliness) in the Assamese society. In this proverb, it is believed that the girls who have masculine attributes like hard spoken, rough, that house does not prosper. It is necessary to have feminine quality in girls to manage the house.

3.6 LEGALIZING VIOLENCE WITHIN MARRIAGE:

In some Assamese proverbs, it is considered right to beat the wife. These proverbs are promoting toxic masculinity and glorifying aggression towards women.

‘Katari dhara bahile,tirota baba kile’ (Gurdon, 1896:34) and

“Mahake pasheke diba tao Tehe dekhiba tirir bhao.” “Daot khan, kutharot xil Maheke pasheke tirik kil.” (Deka, 2019:52).

Both of these proverbs interpret that women can be controlled by beating. This kind of proverbs normalizes domestic violence in Assamese society. These types of proverbs also normalize toxic masculinity in society which is not good for men also.

3.7 OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN:

Papadaki has said that objectification means when women are seen as items; valued based on their physical and sexual appearance. Through proverbs, society has fixed some norms and behaviors for girls, girls who follow those norms are ideal women. Ideal women are considered to be those who are soft, sweet, and homely. Feminine attributes use as ornaments of beautification like a beautiful smile, slim figure etc. for example

“maj murt nai suli giriyeke mate rupohi buli”

(No hair on the middle end head yet husband calls her beautiful). (Gurdon, 1896:79).

This proverb depicts that a woman is beautiful only when she has beautiful hair over her head. This is a derisive proverb against those women who do not have the qualities as recognized by the society to be labeled as beautiful. In a society beauty is the main source of female objectification. Through proverbs, society reinforce patriarchal standard of beauty and women who are not fit that standard they alienates from their own self. It destroys their self-confidence



and agency to e Some of Assamese proverbs normalize the notion that women's body is the cause of violence towards her. Like,

Suwali hol borokihr tup,lorai dekhily mare khut (Wikipedia)

(girl is like a fish hook's lure and whenever boy see them they will try to catch)

This proverb depicts that a girl is like a fish hook's lure whenever boy see them; they will try to grab her. The male gaze is institutionalized by this saying, which fetishizes women's bodies as objects. This adage indicates that boys have more sexual urges than girls, and therefore that boys can stare at girls express them.

3.8 REPRESENTATION OF MOTHERHOOD:

Motherhood is something that is basically idealized in every society. Assamese folklore represents the concept of motherhood as ideal and bad. Where the ideal mother is one who cares for her husband, children do all her household. The mother figure is always portrayed as a symbol of tolerance, caring, nurturing and well-wisher of their children. Proverb like "*aeior human hboKun noir human bobo Kun*" (Borgohain, 2020:38). Here, a mother's love toward her children is compared with a river that flows without any intervention. Such proverbs reflect mother's love toward her child unconditional and she never demands anything return of her love. In Assamese folklore, there has been some proverb like "*Mahi aai morom kheror jui homan*" "*mur pun hoi ho tionir pur dhari nai, pati nai matitte hu*" (Gurdon, 1896:74). Portraying stepmother as a very negative character but here the fact is that stepmother never portrayed as a good wife, soft, passive and imperfect in domestic work like cooking and weaving which is an integral part of an ideal Assamese woman and those qualities only could found in ideal mother or ideal women.

3.9 POSITIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS WOMEN:

Proverbs reflect the ideologies of patriarchy but also it celebrates the strong role of women. *Dakor boson* like *vajaya nhle kihor ghor/seneh nohle kihor ador* or *bahir hwoni kakini tamul, pis fale huwani paan, bor ghror huwani gabhoru suwali*. Assamese society never think girl child as a burden, here birth of girl child refers to good luck. House is incomplete without a girl child.

3.10 CONCLUSION:



Assamese proverbs reflect patriarchal ideologies but also celebrate the empowerment of women. The status of Assamese women has been experiencing phenomenal change over the decade. Assamese society needs to avoid those proverbs or dak sayings which are disrespectful and derogatory towards women.

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