

The Status of Women in the Assamese Folktale ‘Mekurir Jiyekar Sadhu’ (The Tale of the Cat’s Daughter): An Analytical Study

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Abstract: The recent spurt of attempts into the study of folklore and gender studies have opened up new standpoints and provided for novel perspectives, questioning the conventional take into these areas. Gender perspective is inevitably occupied a significant place in the academic domain of folklore. Various facets of folklore can be analyzed by use of the gender perspective. In this research paper, an analysis is attempted on the state of women in the well-known folktale entitled ‘Mekurir Jiyekar Sadhu’ (The Tale of the Cat’s Daughter) from the collection of folktales ‘Burhi Air Sadhu’, by the celebrated Assamese author Lakshminath Bezbaruah. The analysis primarily concentrates on the Gender perspective in the select folktale from the folktales collection ‘Burhi Air Sadhu’.

Keywords: Assamese Folktale, Female Character, Gender Perspective, Gender Studies, Male Dominance, Patriarchal Society.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The recent study into folklore has seen the exercise of Gender as a parameter and the various gender perspectives have led to the initiation of new thought processes on folklore. Gender studies in folklore encompasses— Gender perspectives to the evolution of culture and folklore, the prominence of men or women in folklores and a comparative analysis of their respective gender aspects, gender voice i.e. the voice of men or women in the records of folklore, Gender specifics in folklore etc.

Although some studies have been conducted for Lakshminath Bezbaruah’s works entitled ‘*Burhi Air Sadhu*’, gender perspective has not been previously applied to gain information on the state of women and the contemporary society at the time of record.

This research paper attempts to analyze the state of women from gender perspective in a select folktale by the name of ‘*Mekurir Jiyekar Sadhu*’ (*The Tale of the Cat’s Daughter*) from the collection of folktales ‘*Burhi Air Sadhu*’ authored by the renowned Lakshminath Bezbaruah of Assam. The principal analytical discussion on the select folktale is preceded by a brief portrayal on intertwining areas of significance viz. gender studies, pillars of gender formation in society, areas in gender studies, relation between gender studies and folklore and the context of gender studies in folklore.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The paper aims to analyze the state of women in society by application of Gender perspective as an analytical lens to the famous folktale ‘*Mekurir Jiyekar Sadhu*’ (*The Tale of the Cat’s Daughter*) by Lakshminath Bezbaruah. Such a study is intended to bring out the state of women in a patriarchal society.

1.3 Methodology

The present study is based on analytical method. The analysis primarily concentrates on the Gender perspective. Secondary data have been collected from library work.

II. THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

2.1 Concept of Gender and Gender Studies

The usual widespread misconception about the interchangeability of Sex and Gender needs no introduction. Sex is a creation of birth while Gender is created by the society we live in. The society forms *Gender Identity*. The concept of Gender is thus an independent academic domain.

However, feminism is another sphere that is entangled with gender studies. Evidently, the fight put up by feminism against *Gender bias* is existent from inception of the former term. This provides for a coordinated insight into folklore from feminism and gender perspective. Feminism is seen to gain popularity with the rising development of underdeveloped and developing nations across the globe. And yet the civilization has not surpassed the barriers of *Gender specific issues* till date. Such barriers are frequently observed in the various aspects of folklore. Evidences of these issues are reflected in the folklore of various cultures and are termed as *Gender Dimensions of Folklore* (Islam 2011: 299).

2.2 Gender Studies and the Pillars of Gender Formation

In the discussion of Gender, a significant area is Gender formation in society. This context has been elaborately discussed in the book “The Second Sex” (1949) by French author Simon De Beauvoir. The subject of Gender studies as a whole is immensely influenced by the Beauvoir’s quotation that “One is not born, but becomes, women”. It may be noted here that Beauvoir did not place his faith in the sexual nature of women. Instead, he placed his importance on nature of human being. Beauvoir has earnestly attempted to assert in his writings that Gender formation and Gender Identity is a result of society and not a result of birth. (*Supplementary reading of Beauvoir’s book “The Second Sex” is suggested for better understanding on the matter*).

Gender studies places focused discussion on societal-cultural Gender alone. This does not mean that the subject of ‘Biological Sex’ can be completely ignored since the formation of Gender by socialization and social processes are based on the revelations from ‘Biological Sex’.

Taking Biological Sex as a reference, the social processes provides standards of *male-female behavior* and teaches *male-female characteristics* to the subjects in society.

2.3 Areas of Discussion in Gender Studies

The scope of Gender Studies is widespread. Although not exhaustive, the principal areas discussed under Gender Studies can be stated as below:

- The place of men and women in our society and related studies.
- Comparative analytical study between men and women’s place in society.
- Comparative analysis between men and women for rights and privileges in the society.
- The subject of Gender role and the processes of Gender Role Socialization.
- The power of Gender in society.
- The importance of eradicating Gender Specific Bias in society.

2.4 Gender Studies and study of Folklore

The close relationship between Gender and Folklore is made evident by numerous milestones that mark the shaping of Folklore taking women as a locus of creation. However, some works also suggest men as a primary and dominant character in society. Thus, Gender Studies cannot be ignored as longer than it is, in the study of Folklore and. These folklores are hence termed as *Gender Specific Folklore* (Islam 2011: 300). Evidently enough, Gender Perspective is a significant academic domain in the study of society and folklore.

2.5 Scope of Gender Studies of Folklore

There are a few important parameters that uphold analytical discussions on Folklore. Religion, region, language, context, age, etc. are some worth a mention. Among these parameters, Gender also finds a significant place. The study of folklore from Gender Perspective can encompass numerous areas among which the principal ones are mentioned below:

- The study of the evolution of Folk-culture from Gender Perspective.
- The nature and importance of Gender Specific Folklore.
- The study of the expressions of Gender Voice in various areas of Folklore.
- The study of issues, challenges, deprivations, social barriers etc. faced by women in popular Folklore.
- The study of the development of Female uprising against the social barriers in Folklore.
- The study of the perception of women towards the established customs and traditions in society, as recorded in Folklore.
- Investigations into the views of subjects in society towards the differences between men and women in folklore.
- The study on effects rippling from Folklore on the Gender Role and Gender Role Socialization processes.
- Study of the various contributions of women to the various areas in Folklore. (*ibid* : 302-303)

III. THE STATE OF WOMEN IN THE FOLKTALE 'MEKURIR JIYEKAR SADHU'

'*Burhi Aair Sadhu*' is a popular collection of folktales for children written by Lakshminath Bezbaruah. This book comprising of 31 folktales, published in the year 1911, is one of the greatest contributions to the Assamese literature. The content of the tales were meticulously written from the popular tales for children passed among the Assamese folk. A noted folktale among these is '*Mekurir Jiyekar Sadhu*' or 'The Tale of the Cat's Daughter' (Bezbaruah 2010: 6-9).

The rest of the paper presents an analytical take on the state of women, as evident or indicated in the folktale '*Mekurir Jiyekar Sadhu*' (The Tale of the Cat's Daughter).

3.1 The Use of Women as a Sexual Being

Men and women are to be identified as Human beings rather than creating distinctions and constructing artificial barriers in the various dimensions of socialization. On being identified as human beings alone, the differences-divisions between men and women can be reduced, id not eradicated. However, the male dominant society, as portrayed in existing folklore, considers women as mere *Sexual Beings*.

Drawing from the folktale '*Mekurir Jiyekar Sadhu*', it is observed that the *Merchant* never asked about the reason of distress to the cat's younger daughter nor was any attempt/intention made to rescue the elder daughter who was abducted by the *Merman*. The obvious indication showed here points to the identity of men and his nature. The nature of men that visualizes women merely as an object of sexuality. The portrayal of the scene stresses on the words '*lonely girl by the river shore*' and '*beautiful lady*' and the succeeding scene of the merchant taking away the girl, with the pretext of providing shelter or being noble. The sentence in the original writing— "*...ejon mudoi beparoloi aahute okolxoriya rupohi chuwalijoni noir parot bohi thoka dekhi taik nawot loi guchi gol.*" (*ibid*: 8) mean that the merchant took away the lonely beautiful girl whom he found crying on the river shore. This provides clear evidence of the merchant's intention as a man. "*ghar pai mudoie tar dujoni ghoiniyekor aagote taiko ejoni xoru ghoini pati lole.*" (*ibid*: 8) mean that immediately upon reaching home, the Merchant proclaimed the girl as his third wife, having his two previous wives as witnesses. It is also known from the tale that the Merchant was absent during two instances of child delivery of his third/youngest pregnant wife. The constant involvement in his business/trade may be a possible reason for his absence. However, this cannot be considered an excuse enough to waive off all responsibilities of the Merchant as a husband from the time he planted a seed in the womb of his third wife. Hence, the merchant should have been present for the crucial time of child delivery by his youngest wife. The mere presence of a husband during times like that provides immense support to the woman expecting a child. Once an excuse is twice intended. The Merchant failed in being present for child delivery for a second time. This shows the nature of Men during the time.

These directions of thought suggest that the Merchant saved the cat's younger daughter, only to serve his sexual pleasure being attracted by beauty and tender age of the girl. The age of the previous two wives may have been towards the higher side, as suggested in the tale that— "*komal boyoxiya xoru ghoiniyekok mudoie aagor dujoni ghoiniyekotkoi bechi marom koriboloi dharile.*" (*ibid*: 8) the Merchant started showing greater love towards the younger and tender aged wife than his two previous wives. However, the word '*love*' used here hides many other motives of men at that time. The love shown by the Merchant towards the youngest wife sparked hatred in the two previous wives for the youngest among them. Polygamy could underlie such contempt among women. The two previous wives conspired against the youngest wife and convinced her that she gave birth to a '*piece of log*' (*dhekithora*) and a pumpkin. The truth is though, there were two healthy born sons to the youngest wife, whom the contemptuous wives floated into the river. Surprisingly, the Merchant had no suspicion to the incidents nor did he attempt to investigate the matter any further. The Merchant was a Man and knew that he would never have shortage of women. Hence, he could take away a lonely and beautiful girl crying on the shore of a river. If necessary, such a man could also purchase women. Such was the state of women.

3.2 Polygamy

In the folktale '*Mekurir Jiyekar Sadhu*', the Merchant took a lonely beautiful girl crying on the river shore and made her his wife. The Merchant never tried to enquire the reason of distress of the girl he took from the river shore. He already had two wives before the girl he took. This did not stop him from making a third wife. The Merchant summarily ignored the state of sorrow of the young girl who had recently lost her mother and had seen her elder sister abducted by the *Merman* before her very eyes. The girl's intention to go with the merchant let alone marrying him was never a question of right or say. This places the nature of the Merchant who took away the lonely girl and immediately upon reaching home announced her as his third wife before his two previously married wives.

3.3 The Absence of Justice and Male Dominance

In the folktale, the Merchant eventually came to know of the conspiracy against the youngest wife by his two previous wives. Upon knowledge of the truth, the Merchant had cut out the nose and ears of the two contemptuous wives and chased them away from his house, without trying to investigate into the root causes of the whole affair. Polygamy itself seems to have been a major cause of all the trouble. The Merchant himself was absent on two instances of child delivery by his youngest wife. He had previously accepted without question that his youngest wife had given birth to a piece of log and a pumpkin on two separate instances. But he would not be judged for the simple reason of being a Man. The faults on the part of the Merchant can be pointed out as follows:

- The taking of a lonely beautiful girl from a river shore.
- No attempt on his part in rescuing the cat's elder daughter
- No importance placed on the intention of the young girl to marry/not to marry him
- Absence during child delivery
- The chasing away of the two previous wives without sound judgment or benefit of doubt.

IV. CONCLUSION

The popular folktale 'Mekurir Jiyekar Sadhu' from the book 'Burhi Aair Sadhu' by Lakshminath Bezbaruah has led to the revelation of the social differences between men and women. This tale exposes or indicates some of the notable challenges, issues, obstacles and social divisions faced by the women community in society. An analysis of this folktale with Gender Perspective has led us to put forth the following conclusions:

- This folktale portrays the male dominant social picture along with the Gender differences existing during the time.
- In such a society, women were looked at as *Sexual Beings* instead of *Human Beings*.
- Through this, the *Gender Psyche* of a *Male Dominant* society is well displayed.
- It is evident that there was no voice of women against the social differences at the time.

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