

Portraying Self and Other in Patriarchy: Four Assamese Folktales in Perspective

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Abstract

Society is dynamic and usually presents a reflection of change and continuity. Therefore, it holds key to understand present in a better way with an investigation of the past. The past of existing societies/communities is unscripted and the scripted present has emerged from oral tradition. In fact unscripted communities were not suitable for academic engagement in specialised disciplines till recent years. But they are storehouse of knowledge for a better understanding of the present. In view of this, the paper is attempted to understand the phenomenon of patriarchy prevalent in past societies with reference to four folktales from Assam as case study in order that such studies could be further conducted to appreciate present discourses like feminism, queer studies, etc. having root in patriarchy.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Self and Other, Folktales, Feminism, Oral Tradition

1.0 Introduction

Self and other is the dichotomy that reflects in different contexts, including patriarchy. This dichotomy is critically engaged in Simone de Beauvoir's magnum opus *The Second Sex*. The difference between male and female as "Self and Other", the perspective that runs through the pages of the book, has nothing to do with "biological, psychological, or economic fate"; but "it is the civilization as a whole" that "determines the figure that the human female presents in society" (de Beauvoir 1997:295). She is someone *with the man* but *not the man* beyond biological difference. She is different as the culture or society constructs her. de Beauvoir's famous opening statement in Book II of *The Second Sex* that reads, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (de Beauvoir 1997:295) testifies her culture determined "Self", but as "Other" to the man being the "Self". The statement has three crucial but interrelated implications; first it portrays man and woman as a binary category of "Self and Other"; second, the category is formulated in patriarchy; and third, the "Other" is constructed in a cultural perspective which she calls intervention in the process of socialisation. Major part of the Book II engages in the process of socialisation that constructs man and woman as

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“Self and Other”. It is evident in a recent work (Bagra 2020) in which “growing” (enculturation and socialisation) of a woman in patriarchy is engaged.

Existence of patriarchy does not allude only to society practising patriliney; it is also prevalent in matriliney where decision making power rests on maternal uncle (*see* Lyngdoh & Nopngkynrih 2015 and Jain & Mahmia 2021). Arguably, patriarchy is culture determined irrespective of patriliney or matriliney, and therefore, an understanding of man and woman as the “Self” and the “Other” in patriarchy has to be attempted in a cultural perspective.

Every society or community has its culture; theoretically, culture and community are synonyms and coterminous. This proposition turns debatable when a community or society displays heterogeneity in the field of religion, occupation, adherence to political ideologies, etc. like our modern society. But traditional communities, whether peasant or tribal communities, which are non-scripted, culture and community are theoretically coterminous. Earlier anthropological studies reveal their synonymy, particularly in the context of tribes. It is to be argued that village and peasant communities may have scripts, but they are non-scripted in the sense that their history or ideas are not scripted. Their cultural heritage reflects in orality like that of the tribal tradition. An understanding of their culture needs an engagement with oral tradition, many aspects of which have been scripted these days. But basically these scripted literatures underlie the essence of orality and the cultural heritage of the community or society which it belongs to.

What follows from the above argument is that oral tradition (folklores) which forms a crucial component of culture (Tylor 1958 and Dundes 1969) can be engaged with to understand woman as the “Other” in patriarchy. Culture, primarily in non-scripted tradition, reflects a holistic perspective as opposed to specialised approach to research engagement; and culture being an integral whole of all aspects, every aspect is a microcosm of the culture whole (Pertin 2009). Arguably, a reference to oral tradition, or to any element of it, can be useful to understand woman as the “Other” in patriarchy from a cultural perspective.

1.1 Objectives, Methodology, and Significance

Taking this theoretical perspective in view, the present study attempts to understand the idea of patriarchy in folktales that was instrumental in maintaining the system in the past. The study also assumes that continuity of patriarchy in our contemporary time is embedded in culture. Understandably, the paper is a simple academic engagement to understand social relations and status differentiation across gender using a contemporary conceptual frame of analysis. But the society is not static; it evolves historically and thereby holds challenges to understand present possibilities and opportunities by engaging in its past. Contemporary discourses like feminism, queer studies, women rights, gender in development, etc. have emerged to contest patriarchy which has also a root in the past. What remains amiss in the narratives of a folktale portraying women is endeavoured to bring out alive in this paper.

The present study is precisely intended to add to our understanding of contemporary discourses in historical process and to form a right perspective to appreciate emerging human rights concern in a meaningful way. Woman as Other in patriarchy is conceptualised in this paper with reference to select Assamese folktales to dispel the common notion that women in traditional societies in general and in the Northeast in particular enjoy equal rights.

The paper selects four folktales, the genre of folklore indicating their belonging to oral tradition, from the work of Laxmi Nath Bezbaruah (1911), entitled *Burhi Aair Sadhu*. The

stories were selected in which woman is a protagonist. Select tales are taken from Nripen Dutta Baruah's (2020) English rendering of Bezbaruah's work which is entitled *Old Mother's Wise Tales* (eBook edition). For this paper the tales are briefly retold by the author without sacrificing the essence of narratives.

It is to be mentioned that there is a plethora of work on the theme of patriarchy, feminism, empowerment, folklores, etc. However, an understanding of patriarchy in folktales is yet to emerge as a critical academic engagement in the Northeast states. A recent study (Bagra op cit.) has made an attempt to understand the language of patriarchy in oral narratives of selected tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The language used for a woman, as Bagra (ibid.) maintains, has been narrated either in a folktale or a proverb. But the language used to express ideas in narratives in order to justify the patriarchy tag labelled at the woman or the even described has not been scrutinised to understand how far it is gender neutral. Other studies of Gogoi and Talukdar (2021) and Mili (2022) are just preliminary enquiries on the status and nature of women in patriarchy. In another study Bhattacharyya (2022) has depicted relationship of women with nature with reference to folktales. Kaustav Chakraborty (2021) has attempted an understanding of queer in folktales of four tribes, namely Toto, Rabha, Lepcha and Limbu communities through queer lens. In this sense, the present endeavour is a critical engagement on the topic.

1.2 Folktales

Select four folktales for the purpose of our study are as under:

1.2.1 *Story of Kite's Daughter*

Once upon a time, in a remote village, a wealthy potter resided with his wife and daughters. Tormented by the absence of a son, the potter was very unhappy. When his wife conceived again, the potter threatened her that if she would deliver another daughter, he would sell her to the tribal people dwelling in the distant hills. Unfortunately, again a baby girl was born but being terrified by her husband's warning the wife put the baby in a basket and set it afloat in a river.

Downstream, a washer man rescued the baby girl but suddenly a kite descended from the sky caught the baby girl and took her to the nest on a large *peepal* tree. The kite then started taking care of the girl and the girl regarded the kite to be her mother. As the girl became an adult, the kite told the girl to recite a sacred incantation whenever she is frightened of anything.

One day a merchant while resting under the shade of that *peepal* tree, found a large strand of hair. When he gazed above, the merchant was enchanted by the beauty of the girl and fell in love with her. The girl who had never seen a human being before was gripped by fear on encountering a human. As such she quickly chanted the sacred lines as told by her mother. Immediately the kite reached the spot and witnessed the man who had fall in love with the girl. The kite decided to offer the girl's hand to the man for marriage.

The merchant who already had seven wives then took the girl with him and married her. But within the chambers of his home, insecurity, envy and jealousy prevails among his prior wives against the new bride. In the absence of the merchant, the wives tortured the new girl to do house stuff such as cooking meals, cleaning the house and so on. Since the kite's daughter was inexperienced she was helped by the kite every time by doing some magic.

Surprisingly, guided by kite's wisdom, the work given to the new girl was done very nicely without giving any chance of complain. Likewise the new bride became a favourite to their husband by her acts. This made the sister-in-law very furious and at the same time suspicious of the girl.

However, as time flowed, the previous wives learned about the magical help of the kite. Hence, one day by mimicking the voice of the kite's daughter called the bird and killed it. Not only that the cruel wives also in the absence of the merchant sold the kite's daughter to a fisherman. The fisherman who took her away used her to guard the fish he caught in the river.

Days passed; one day when the kite's daughter was guarding the fishes she was singing a sad song recounting the grief and agony of her life. Meanwhile, during that time the merchant was sailing on a boat and he recognized the girl's voice. The merchant then rescued her and concealed her within a trunk, hidden away from those cruel wives. On reaching home he confronted his seven wives and inquired about the missing bride. Nobody could tell him the truth. So to reveal the truth, the merchant devised a plan. A thread of cotton was placed over a pit laden with spikes and spears, and ordered the wives to cross the pit by balancing on the thread. Except the seventh wife, who was innocent and was busy during that day (when new bride was sold to the fisherman), no one could escape the trap and thus fall into the pit, thereby lost their lives. From that day onwards, the merchant started to live with the two innocent and loving wives for the rest of his life.

1.2.2 Pious Woman

Long ago in a small village of Assam, there was an old couple who had seven sons. When the seven sons grew up they got married and lived happily together. Amongst the seven daughters in law, the old couple consider youngest daughter in law to be adorned with the blessings of luck and good fortune. For her pious nature she was given the charge of the house after the death of the old couple. The members of the house abide by the rules set by the youngest daughter in law. Amongst the rules, one peculiar rule was that none shall return home empty handed, and all shall contribute whatever they acquire.

When one day, one of her family member unable to find anything brought a dead snake and gave it to the youngest daughter in law, miraculously, instead of dead and rotten snake, a bag of gold ornaments was found. Again in another instance, one day a family member packed a heap of cow dung and gave it to the youngest one, which the later sealed on a bamboo tube. Many years later an announcement was issued by the king that he was in need of some old cow dung for the treatment of his daughter. The king also declared that whoever can fulfil his request will be reward with two bags full of gold and silver coins. Accordingly the youngest daughter in law received the reward.

Gradually the news of her pious nature was spread in the village. But one day a mysterious man pretended to be a beggar came to that house and with some magical spell took away the youngest daughter in law. Unfortunately since the day of her disappearance, ill fate befell on the household. Gradually except the son of eldest daughter in law every member of the house died. Years went by, one day the nephew accidently came across his missing aunt. He pleaded her to return with him and dispel the curse that had plagued the household. But the aunt said she could only accompany him only if he fulfils a daunting task of killing her abductor's soul. She told him that the soul of her kidnapper resides within a

Mynnah bird that stays with Lord Brahma. Accordingly the nephew worship Brahma and kept no stones unturned to please the lord. Lord Brahma was so pleased with the boy because of his devotion that He offered His daughter's hand to the boy. The boy after getting married asked the Lord for the said bird. As soon as he received the bird, the boy killed it and accordingly the man who had kidnapped his aunt died. As promised the youngest daughter in law was freed and she joined her nephew's family, bringing an end to their misfortunes.

1.2.3 Tejimola

In a bygone age, within a small village of Assam, there lived a maiden of exquisite beauty by the name of Tejimola, who resides with her father and stepmother. Her father has a profound affection for Tejimola for which her stepmother became very jealous of Tejimola. Though the stepmother as demanded by her husband shows care and attention to Tejimola, but she intensely hates her step daughter. The father, being a merchant, was required to embark on a prolonged journey for work, leaving Tejimola in the care of her stepmother.

The stepmother thought that the absence of her husband would be a great opportunity to get rid of her stepdaughter who made her life miserable. The ill intention of the stepmother was however unknown to Tejimola. One day Tejimola was invited to one of her friend's wedding and her stepmother insisted Tejimola to attend the wedding. The stepmother cunningly provided her with a bag containing what she claimed to be her wedding dress. She wanted Tejimola to wear it during the wedding day of her friend but asked Tejimola to open the bag only when she reached her friend's home. Unknown to Tejimola, the bag held within it a rat and burnt coals. When the moment arrived for Tejimola to unveil her attire at the wedding, she was in profound shock, as she found her dress in tatters and ornaments reduced to ashes.

Upon returning from the wedding, Tejimola was subjected to scolding and beating at the hands of her stepmother, who accused her of wilfully ruining the dress. The cruel stepmother then assigned Tejimola the task of pounding paddy using the traditional rice pounding tool known as a *dheki*. Unfamiliar with the laborious task, her stepmother pounded her hands, legs and her head in the *dheki* which resulted in death of the poor little girl. The very place where Tejimola's life ended grew a pumpkin tree, bearing an abundance of pumpkins.

Days passed; when one day a beggar woman saw the pumpkins she asked the stepmother for some of them. When the beggar woman was about to pluck the pumpkin she heard a voice from the tree that urged the woman not to pluck the pumpkin and said it was Tejimola who was put to death by her stepmother. The stepmother after hearing the beggar's experience cut down the pumpkin tree, but in that place, a lemon tree grew. A similar scenario took place after some days, where some villagers when tried to pluck the lemons heard a female voice. After they reported the instance to the mother, without delay she cut the lemon tree and threw it in the nearby river. Tejimola's spirit, however, found its dwelling within a lotus flower in that very river. One day when her merchant father was on his return journey, he encountered a beautiful lotus. Filled with longing to gift this flower to his beloved daughter, he tried to pluck it, but was startled to hear a voice resembling his daughter. Then he asked the lotus if she was his daughter Tejimola then she should come along with him in the form of a bird. Miraculously, Tejimola transformed into a bird and accompanied her father home.

Upon their return, when the father inquired about Tejimola's whereabouts, the stepmother lied that she had gone to her uncle's residence. Unable to bear more, the father requested the bird to manifest itself as Tejimola. Astonishingly, Tejimola reappeared again and the cruel stepmother was chased out of the house. Thereafter both father and daughter lived happily ever after.

1.2.4 Kanchoni

Once in a family, there lived seven brothers, the youngest amongst whom was the most amiable and gentle one. The youngest brother was loved by the elder brothers and thus made him in charge of the whole family. Because of their husband's affection, the wives of the elder brothers were very jealous of the youngest brother. The jealousy escalates to that extent, where through some black magic; the wives transformed the boy into a dog.

Eventually, one day the dog reached a childless couple's home and became their cherished companion. One day, the wife, while praising the dog for its cleverness, jokingly promised that if she conceives a daughter, she will marry her daughter to the dog. Surprisingly, the wife got pregnant and gave birth to a beautiful girl, whom they named, Kanchoni. When Kanchoni grew older, her mother kept her promise made to the dog. Kanchoni being an honest, simple girl has obeyed her mother and agreed to marry a dog and dutifully became the dog's wife. Kanchoni always took good care of the dog and one day while bathing the dog she discovered a thorn embedded in one of its ear lobe. Once the thorn was removed, the dog turns out to be a young man. However, Kanchoni, fearing societal judgement and disgrace reinsert the thorn and the boy transforms to a dog again.

Upon returning home, Kanchoni asked her mother to remove the thorn and when the thorn was removed the dog turn into a boy. When this news reached to the king, the boy was called and was given the charge of the royal stable. But when the king came to know about the captivating beauty of Kanchoni, he seeks to make her his queen. Despite his persistent efforts, Kanchoni resists. Later the furious king commanded his men to kill Kanchoni's husband. When Kanchoni learned about the king's order she also sacrificed her life alongside her husband.

As per the tale, later on where the bodies Kanchoni and her husband were cremated two different varieties of saplings were planted. Astonishingly, both the trees grew to a great height and eventually intertwine, forming a single unified tree- a symbol of their enduring love and sacrifice.

1.3 Self and Other in Patriarchy

Folktales are generally told with the aim of imparting a moral lesson. In first three folktales ultimate punishment for wickedness and victory of good nature comes out as moral lesson. In the fourth one, i.e. Kanchoni, union between husband and wife after death due to their eternal love is presented. However, the moral lesson, among other things, is woven with the warp and weft of cultural/social values which silently and certainly build up an embedded cultural personality and get institutionalised. That is why an individual does not feel alien to social practices and becomes the carrier them forward. The familiarity with norms, values, ethics, creative imagination and perspectives imbibed through folktales guide his or her social behaviour, often unquestioningly. Unless one is critical, the guided moral lesson in the folktale covers up the forces of socialisation and acculturation in it.

However, scientific enquiries do not allow an escape of these *silent messengers* (like cultural values and practices like patriarchy which impact perspectives) from critical academic engagement. Beyond the moral lessons in our select folktales there are crucial lessons on patriarchal values projecting man and woman as “Self and Other”. The woman is the “Other” because the civilization or culture describes her as feminine, prescribes her ideal roles and places her in patriarchal dichotomy in contrast to man. This contrast, however, is not exclusively binary opposite, but holds complementarity; “she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another” (de Beauvoir 1997:20). To put it simply, the woman is relative to man (de Beauvoir 1997:15-16 and 295). Relative formation of man as the “Self” and woman as the “Other” is portrayed with man holding the power of controlling woman and describing her as she fits into patriarchal ideology, “she is simply what man decrees”. Relational duality of the “Self” and the “Other” is articulated in that “Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man” (de Beauvoir 1997:16). Duality and relationality describe the notion of the “Self” and the “Other” in a patriarchy which is evident from the ‘silent’ idea embodied in folktales while each of them aims to teach a moral lesson.

In tales such as Kite’s daughter, Tejimola and Kanchoni woman’s beauty is contrasted with richness of man as merchant, rich potter or king. Being beautiful, woman is vulnerable; and being rich, man is portrayed as having the capability of taking care of woman. Thus, male dominance and female powerlessness (cf. Tyson 2015 and Becker 1999) are building block of patriarchal ideology. The vulnerability of woman is evident when Kanchoni was proposed by the king in spite of her marital status and the pious woman was tricked and carried away by mysterious beggar.

The idea of man to be rich in patriarchy assigns a passive role to woman (Mirkin 1984) in domestic sphere. No doubt, the potter, the fisherman, the king and the merchant are portrayed active because of their respective occupations and duties. The women confined to household, or watching the fish as in Kite’s daughter, Kanchoni, and Pious woman points to passive role of women.

Patriarchy society assumes that a woman is “good girl” with traditional a gender role obeying patriarchal rules and “bad girl” by violating it (Tyson 2015:85 and *passim*). Pious woman, Kanchoni and Kite’s daughter are prototype of patriarchal notion of “good girl”. Step mother, and co-wives in the story of Tejimola, Kite’s daughter and Kanchoni represent the idea of ‘bad girls’ in patriarchy. Woman of “bad girl” or “good girl” nature has either punishment or reward as is in the tales of Tejimola and Kite’s daughter, the decision of which is man’s prerogative. The punishment by the step mother or co-wives to daughter or youngest co-wife shows negative side of the power they enjoy being elder in the line within the category of woman. It is jealousy that guides the action, but not a punishment for the violation of patriarchal norms.

Importance of son, as is seen in Kite’s daughter, understandably places daughter as “Other” in the domain of parental preference of a child. Son preference is generally an important characteristic of patriarchy, especially in patrilineal society (Kumar & Priyanka 2018). But it is not altogether absent in matriliney even. A woman is expected to be good mother, care taker of child and guarantor of child’s safety and welfare. The last concern is to give the daughter in marriage to a suitable man. The kite is portrayed as the prototype of ideal woman in patriarchy. Marriage is a crucial feature in patriarchy in which woman stays with

the man. It is noteworthy to cite de Beauvoir. She maintains, “Women is a special prize which the hero, the adventurer, and the rugged individualist are destined to win” (de Beauvoir 1997:215). In the folktales, it is seen that merchants have more than one wife, because that fits into patriarchal ideology that woman need man and a man is capable of maintaining more women. It also gives the notion of woman as property. Studies point to surrendering of property rights by woman (Engels 1985 and Lerner 1986:chs. 1 and 11) as the beginning of patriarchy in which woman has been reduced to a property of man in the sense of surrendering her body and labour.

1.4 Conclusion

Patriarchy is culture universal and sustains through prescribed norms, values and practices across elements of it like folktales for example. The folktales examined in the study dispel the idea that woman and man enjoy equal rights in traditional societies of Assam. Different ideals and practices of patriarchy are present subtly and silently to facilitate a narrative with a moral lesson. Man and woman as the “Self and the Other” clearly portray a relational duality, a unique example of a binary perspective, in patriarchal societies. These ideals familiarise patriarchal values in the process of socialisation of story listeners. More importantly, these *silent messengers* provide the scope of understanding dynamics of traditional societies using hegemonic and queer lens. Contemporary gender issue, feminism, empowerment, etc. can be better appreciated in a historical scrutiny. Arguably, the study is a preliminary engagement with folktales and holds possibilities of further investigation using contemporary research perspectives to understand emerging issue around gender.

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