

The Silent "Others": A Study on Selected Folktales of Lakshminath Bezbarua's

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Abstract:

Folktales are a mirror of the society. It is generally claimed that to understand a community one must go through its treasure house of folktales. The experts in this field believe that folktales around the world serve some special functions that are recurrent in nature. William Bascom has identified four general features of the genre of folktales which are more or less common around the world. One of them is the subjugated status of women in the patriarchal world of the folktales. This, without question, is also a special facet of folktales of Assam. Many research works are done on subsidiary position of women in the folk narratives along with their problematic silence. Their silence can definitely be studied with the recent developments in gender theory. But equally problematic is the silence of the "Raj" or the society as depicted in the Assamese folktales. This paper intends to find out why the society in these folktales remains silent even though it witnesses injustice and cruelty particularly inflicted on the womenfolk. For this purpose the researcher has selected three popular folktales from Lakshminath Bezbarua's collection of folktales **Burhi Aair Sadhu** (Old Grandmother's Tales) viz. "Mekurir Jiyekor Sadhu" (Cat's Daughter's Tale), "Tejimola" and "Tula Aru Teja" (Tula and Teja).

Keywords: Folktales, Silence, Gender Performativity, Jealousy.

Introduction:

Folktales are an interesting field to explore from various perspectives. The word "folk" can refer to a group of people or the everyday lifestyle of a community, whereas the word "lore" can refer to the outlet of the inner thoughts and feelings of that group. In historical and literary annals, the umbrella term of folklore includes songs, dance forms, tales and even customs. The term "folklore" gained its currency in 19th century though it had been always associated with the sense of antiquity of a group of people. Though the word "folk" refers particularly to the rural community, but in present context it has shaken off that particular connotation and has embraced even the people of cities and towns who carry certain tenets of folk life. The anonymous folk productions raise various concerning issues which interest people across time and space.

Simon J. Bronner, in his work **Folklore: The Basics** (2017), says that the term folklore was introduced to the intellectual discourse by William John Thoms in 1846 when the latter was much petrified by the march of the industrial revolution. Thoms expected that all the different genres which were studied separately, for example a society's customs, superstitions, manners, stories, song and dance etc., must come under the broad compass of folklore as all are interrelated in one way or other. He found that these various aspects of human culture would be erased under the effect of industrialization. Modernism would devour all these different genres of traditional art with new technical modifications. In this regard,

very interestingly, British folklorist J. Jacom has the view that folklore has always been updating itself with time and discovering new interpretations in order to adapt itself to the new age audience (Bronner,43).

As a constituent of folklore, folktales are also said to be the mirror of a society. Eminent experts in this field like Vladimir Propp, William Bascom lament the fact that much research work has not been done in this field. Instead, the writers are satisfied with mere collection of folktales around the world and of course, doing translation works. But recently we have noticed a spurt of new theories in the domain of the folktale particularly in its narration which accuse the stories of being coated with patriarchy. According to William Bascom one of the functions of the folktales is to validate the cultural norms and preserve the same “....justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them” (336). The culture which these tales so diligently try to preserve is the one where women are placed in a disadvantageous position. From that perspective these tales can be studied as a narrative politics too.

If we look at the narrative of the folktales we find that women characters are not only placed in a subservient position but they are also projected as that part of the mankind which is constantly driven by a feeling of jealousy toward each other. Besides this same gender jealousy, other archetypal images like the stepmother's resentment and hostility toward her rival's children are in abundance in the folktales around the world including the folktales of Assam. North East India particularly Assam is enriched with the different cultures of various ethnic groups. The noted anthropologist Verrier Elwin in the 1960s declared that Assam was a vast treasure house of folktale where every tribal group has its own unique collection. In Assam it was the prominent Assamese writer Lakshminath Bezbarua who had put the effort in collecting these folktales from every nook and corner of the state and compiled them into a publication in 1911. Since then various interpretations have been made about those wonderful tales. These tales reflect the typical village life in its pristine form which used to be an agrarian one. Certain features of these Assamese folktales bear similarity with the tales of other states and even countries. One of them is the practice of polygamy which was prevalent in Assamese society years ago. But in this work the researcher is concerned with the archetypal presentation of women characters which is again general to all the folktales around the world. The women characters in these tales are always accused of being silent on the injustice imposed upon them for some mysterious reasons. These women characters always seem to have some significant duties which they must diligently fulfill. For example, they have to produce a male heir, failing to do which they are sidelined by their rivals. Moreover their expertise also lies in doing household works perfectly that can take them to the position of the most desired ones of the husband. When they are supplanted by rivals or they are punished for their supposed crimes done out of sheer jealousy and competition, it is their jealousy which is quite incomprehensible. But more surprising than their silence is the silence of the society which remains just a witness of all the injustice done on these womenfolk irrespective of the fact that they always have done their duties honestly. They can be read as the “silent others” who hardly have any voice or the courage to question the husband figure who is supposed to be the “owner” of these women. In the proposed study of Bezbarua's **Burhi Aair Sadhu**, the researcher has selected three tales viz. "Mekurir Jiyekor Sadhu" (Cat's Daughter's Tale), "Tejimola" and "Tula Aru Teja" (Tula And Teja) where the society or the “raij” which definitely appear in the story to witness the injustice done on this part of the fair sex and leave without a reaction. In the aforesaid study, the researcher will make an attempt to unveil this enigmatic silence of the “raij” which take the position of the “other” in the story. For this purpose, the researcher will follow the noted American gender theorist Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity.

Methodology:

In this research Lakshminath Bezbarua's folktales will be enumerated with the critical framework of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Interpretive and analytical methods are used to focus on the study. The study of the selected stories will be carried in the form of close reading, analysis and textual references. There are two sources of study that are used here- Primary and Secondary. Primary sources are in the form of texts of the selected stories and non-fictional texts as well while the Secondary sources are taken from journals, articles and reference books.

Butler's theory of Gender Performativity:

Ian Buchanan defines gender as "the set of behavioural, psychological and social characteristics and practices associated with masculinity and femininity" (198). For long the concept of gender was thought to be an alternate to sex until Simone de Beauvoir broke this supposed biological cord between sex and gender. In recent times, American Judith Butler's notion about gender has been presiding over the feminist theories. For Butler, gender is an ambivalent category which does not accept the binary depositing of sex and gender. Again for her, both sex and gender are cultural artefacts. In her work **Gender Trouble** (1990), Butler asserts like Beauvoir that "gender is a process which has neither origin nor end so that it is something that we do "rather than we" are (Salih, 46). But Butler differs from Beauvoir due to her belief that a body in possession of female sex is never bound to have feminine traits. That means one may be a "masculine" woman or a "feminine" man (Salih, 48). The social and cultural discourses have some fixed norms for both sexes according to which one constructs his or her gender. This leads us to believe that within the stipulated behavioural patterns, one has to perform to make his gender confirmed. With the famous analogy, Butler tells us that one has even options in selection of the gender whose behavioural pattern he or she wants to embrace. But unfortunately the options are very limited beyond which one cannot go and perform. Therefore for Butler gender is a performance of those sequences of acts which are prevalent in social discourse, and people hardly dare to go against it since one never wants to exist outside of the society (Salih, 50).

Silence and Gender Jealousy among Women in Folktales:

Folktales promote women's rivalry and set the stage for jealousy among them whereas man's culpability is always covered up. They act as the judge whose duty is to differentiate the "good woman" from the "bad" one. The archetypal good women always have to face the challenges from their rival bad women. This dichotomous representation of women leaves a room for jealousy among the women characters. Phyllis Chelsea, in his **Women's Inhumanity to Women**, drives in the point that women's jealousy is more aimed at her peer woman than man (170). This jealousy is more evident in the folktales. In the Assamese collection of folktales **Burhi Aair Sadhu** by Lakshminath Bezbarua we find the reiteration of the same image of woman. These womenfolk are even able of committing some heinous crimes against their rivals. Now, going by Butler's famous gender theory which relates gender to a series of sequential acts or performances, instead of accepting the jealousy among women as something quite natural, we can look toward this problem of jealousy as their reaction toward the negligence of their gender performance. In the selected tales of this study namely Mekurir Jiyekor Sadhu, Tejimola and Tula Aru Teja, we find how the rivalry between the co-wives is passed on to their children. The bad ones definitely get punished here, but what is more shocking to us is that the virtuous good ones never try to

bring reconciliation with their supposed rivals. They are likely to forget that those whom they always have been considering rivals actually were getting good scores in gender performance before their arrival. Their earnestness only costs them being supplanted by another. When they are punished for their supposed crimes, the favourite wife's silence also takes the form of retaliation.

The silent “others” in Burhi Air Sadhu:

The various gender studies on Lakshminath Bezbarua's **Burhi Air Sadhu** mostly discuss about the binarisms in the character representation in the tale which definitely includes the metaphor of silence. Before delving any farther into this metaphor of silence, we must take note of some common thematic and structural features of all of them. First, we find that the tales are structurally invested with gender jealousy along with a repetition of events by which is meant that whatever the “good” woman goes through, it is repeated on case of her daughter also. Secondly, the presence of the silent “others” in these tales seems to be confusing. These “others” are none other than the society or the “raij” who just act as the silent, inactive spectators to whatever injustice is being done on women of both type. Their enigmatic silence can be exemplified with the help of the three selected tales viz. Mekurir Jiyekor Sadhu, Tejimola and Tula Aru Teja.

In Mekurir Jiyekor Sadhu (Cat's Daughter's Tale), we find a cat playing her gender role as a mother to her two daughters. After her death, her both the daughters are separated as the elder one was “taken” by a nymph leaving the younger at the bank of the river. When the latter was seen crying desperately over the loss of her mother and sister by Mudoi, a trader, he picks her up as his most beautiful youngest wife. His two co-wives naturally do not accept her as she claims more love and affection of the husband being more beautiful and the youngest. But when she fails in performing her gender role of producing an heir because of the conspiracy of her rivals, the same loving and caring husband, Mudoi, throws her out of the house. When her two sons return after some years to reveal their side of story, justice is brought back to the youngest wife and her sons. Now what is enigmatic for us is that the sons' return to their father on that day when there is a religious function being held at the house of Mudoi in the presence of the whole “raij” of the village. But the community people or the “raij” do not ask for any clarification from the two co-wives who misinformed Mudoi about youngest one's unnatural child birth. The community leaves the matter to Mudoi thinking it to be a family matter. In the second tale Tejimola also, Tejimola's stepmother's version of story is never disclosed. Like the two co-wives of Mudoi she is also presented as suffering from gender jealousy, out of which she can never accept her rival's daughter. Still, her cruelty toward Tejimola and the way she kills her is a matter of endless speculation for any sensitive reader. Even after her death, she is transformed into various forms like a gourd plant, a 'jora' lemon and a lotus flower as well, only to communicate how brutally she was murdered. But the society as represented by the old beggar who requests the stepmother for a gourd or the 'gorokhiya' (who tends the cows) boys who ask for some lemons remain unresponsive when the plants try to inform them about her real identity and disclose what happened to her. At last, hopefully her father Haud recognizes her as a lotus flower and justice is established in this tale also. In the third chosen folktale, Tula Aru Teja we discover the same paradigmatic theme of rivalry between the children of the co-wives. We also find the presence of the uncaring society in it. Out of her archetypal jealousy, Lagi kills her rival Alagi for two times. When Alagi is transformed into a tortoise Lagi requests the “raij” to kill it and have a feast on it so that her ailments can be cured. The community people are spontaneously agreed without having any question. Its credulous nature becomes evident when Teja and her brother Kanai, children of Alagi catch their mother

tortoise with broken fishing equipment whereas they could not do so with their good ones.

The silent “others” in these folktales always seem to be more confusing when we try to read these tales in the light of Judith Butler’s notion about gender. In the light of this theory of gender performativity, all the women characters of these tales are vested with the duty of performing her gender role, meaning doing those works which are decided by the society as part of gender confirming process, and when performed diligently they confirm their gender identity of a wife, a mother etc. Between the two categories of women, when we particularly look at the bad ones we never find any mention of neglecting their society vested duties in the narration. In Mekurir Jiyekor Sadhu, both the co-wives feel jealous of the new one as their performed acts of duty are discarded by Mudoi with her arrival. In the second tale of Tejimola, her father Haud informs us that the stepmother took good care of the daughter out of her fear for him though she did not like her at all. Since Haud loved his daughter more than her, she had thought that with Tejimola’s dowry some of her maternal objects which she brought as dowry would have to be sacrificed. Out of her jealousy, she takes the drastic measure of murdering Tejimola. In the third tale also the stepmother Lagi takes good care of her husband and her daughter Tula. Still, the husband gets attracted toward the other one because Lagi fails in performing her socially set gender duties efficiently as compared with Alagi. Accordingly, when they are punished by their “owner” husbands or other patriarchal figures, the “raij” or the community remains silent as it knows that these duties or gender performance yardsticks are set by them. It remains silent though it knows that all those punished “bad” women always have performed their duties from their heart. But the injustice brought upon them is not recognized so as to underestimate their gender performances for the greater interest of the sustenance of patriarchy. The husband figures in these tales are apt representatives of this patriarchy whom the “raij” must support and avoiding the issues in question as reducing them to some personal matters.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can sum up by saying that in the folktales of Assam the silence of the victims is as incomprehensible as that of the community. The supposed “bad” women have to accept their punishment as something inevitable only because it is inflicted on them by their patriarchal lord, their husband. With the purpose of teaching moral lessons particularly to children, these victimized women are presented as vengeful creatures that get what they deserve. Unfortunately their side of the story never gets expressed. Again it is equally unfortunate that their cunningness and manipulative nature become ineffective once they come into the contact with the husband. At the background the silence of the community is also very enigmatic.

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