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**CONSTRUCTION OF
WOMANHOOD: A STUDY WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
ASSAMESE PROVERBS**

**A thesis submitted in part fulfillment of the
requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, it is observed how womanhood is constructed in society and how it is represented in Assamese proverbs. Along with proverbs it also lays emphasis on the other folklore items as the medium of representation of women in society. It is believed that women are oppressed in the society and has been categorised as the second class citizen in the society. They are always seen to be inferior to their male counterparts. This dissertation examines whether such gender-based prejudice is reflected in the various folklore items of Assam, especially in the Assamese proverbs. For such observations, the present work takes the help of a feminist methodology as a tool for examination of the data. Before going to the in depth study of the topic it gives a brief description of earlier research in this field in the introductory chapter itself. The work has been divided into six chapters including the Introduction and the Conclusion. Some areas from Nagaon, a district of Assam have been selected from where the data for this dissertation has been collected. The informants, from both sexes have been selected from these areas irrespective of their ages. The data has been collected in an informal manner, since it is difficult to collect proverbs in a formal structured way from the field. Since this dissertation is based on feminist methodological tools, it includes a brief discussion of the history of feminism. The key terms for this work are construction, representation, ideology, hegemony, stereotype, feminism, gender studies, folklore, paremiology, paremiography, womanhood, Assamese society etc.

DECLARATION

I do hereby declare that the thesis titled “Construction Of Womanhood: A Study with Special Reference to Assamese Proverbs” submitted by me to Tezpur University in part fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Studies under the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, is my own and that it has not been submitted to any other institution, including this University in any other form or published at any time before.

Date: 05.08.11.

Mandakini Baruah.

(Mandakini Baruah)

Registration No. 019 of 2009

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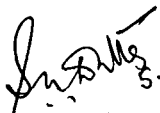
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This is to certify that the thesis entitled “Construction Of Womanhood: A Study with Special Reference to Assamese Proverbs” submitted to the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tezpur University in part fulfillment for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Studies is a record of research work carried out by Ms. Mandakini Baruah under our supervision and guidance.

All help received by her from various sources have been duly acknowledged.

No part of this thesis has been submitted elsewhere for award of any other degree.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The present work intends to study the construction of womanhood and the way in which such social constructs are represented in Assamese proverbs. While there is no gainsaying that it is important to evaluate women's status and position in the society, there are, broadly speaking, two main ways of doing this – by analysing all the day-to-day practices in society relating to women, or by analysing various literary and artistic representations of women. The present work looks at how women are represented in different literary/folk genres. This work is confined to the representation and construction of womanhood in proverbs, in particular, and folklore, in general.

Dan Ben-Amos mentions two terms in folklore—the analytical categories of folklore and the ethnic genres of folklore (qtd. in Ryan 308). Proverb is an independent genre of folk literature and it can be classified as an analytical category of folklore. Further, it can also be said that proverb has emerged from the amalgamation of various ethnic genres which are not synonymous in meaning but share the same platform as regards connotations (ibid). For instance, we can very well go in for a broader analysis of the various ethnic terms of proverbs which have been widely accepted in the Assamese language e.g., *prabād*, *prabacan*, *phakarā jojanā*, *dr̥ṣṭānta*, *patantar* and *bacan*. Though in the real sense these terms may not be strictly categorised as proverbs, but the term 'proverb' has been used in a more inclusive sense because it is observed that scholars have been using the term *prabād* (proverb) in a wider sense to include a very broad spectrum of the

related genres like sayings, proverbial expressions, idioms and phrases besides what is included within the lexical understanding of the English word 'proverb'. It is true that all the above mentioned terms have subtle differences in connotations. Here, in this discussion, the term 'proverb' is used in a more inclusive manner to cover a wide canvas of its ethnic genres, which in the context of the Assamese society, enjoys a position of equal prominence and acceptance. To be a bit more considerate, the available collection of proverbs in Assamese language has always treated such ethnic genres as proverbs keeping aside their occasional differences in technical implications.

Assam is a state of the Indian Union, situated in the north-east region of the country, often called the gateway to the north-east. According to the 2011 census, the total population of the state was 3,11,69,272 out of which 1,59,54,927 are males and 1,52,14,345 are females. The census recorded an overall literacy percentage as 73.18% which comprised of male literacy as 78.81% and the female at 67.27%. As regards language, Assamese is the most widely spoken language in the region. Assam is home to many ethnic groups, out of which 115 groups have been projected. The state had many settlers in the initial days; like the Austro-Asiatic, followed by the Tibeto-Burmese, Indo-Aryans and the Kradais. A total of forty-five languages are spoken by the different communities, and this includes three major language families: Austro-Asiatic, Sino-Tibetan and the Indo-European.

Proverb can be classified as one of the genres of folk literature. Therefore, it is by all means an important part of folklore. Like other folklore items, proverbs can also be the medium of representation. Richard P. Honeck in his book, *A Proverb in Mind: the Cognitive Science of Proverbial Wit and Wisdom* (1997) sheds light on the various understandings of the proverb. Linguistically, according to him, "a

proverb is a phonological, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and, some would add, a semiotic (complex sign) entity” (11). Honeck finally defines proverb “as a discourse deviant, relatively concrete, present (nonpast) tense statement that uses characteristic markers to arouse cognitive ideals that serve to categorize topics in order to make a pragmatic point about them” (ibid 18).

1.1. Statement of the Problem

When we talk about the social construction of a belief or an idea, we mean that the belief or idea is not universal or naturally endowed but the creation of a society. Once, however, a social construct gains wide social acceptance, it becomes an integral part of the traditional beliefs and ideologies of that society. One of the main objectives of the discipline of Cultural Studies is to question the naturalization of what is socially constructed. In doing this, the concept of gender has been immensely useful. The prevalent understanding of gender, in general, and womanhood, in particular, is generated by ideology. Gender is a construct which establishes a relationship between sexuality and power (Gherardi 65).

Patriarchal ideology is not homogenous and uniform across the world; it has its own dynamics which varies from society to society. In addition to the differences arising out of geographical/spatial locations, when we consider the extremely heterogeneous groups of people that constitute India, ideology also differs on the basis of time, place, caste and class. A study of the historical evolution of ideas of masculinity and femininity in a society can, for instance, reveal how these ideas change across time and space. The study of the representation of woman in folk/literary genres can be one way of understanding gender politics in that society. The benefit of analyzing such genres is that while it can reveal a lot about the historical evolution of ideas of masculinity and

femininity, one can also draw some conclusions about the validity and hold of such ideas over the minds of people by looking at the extent to which these genres continue to be used to maintain the traditional hierarchy of gender. While we talk about Cultural Studies, it refers to a multi-disciplinary subject which observes the representations of culture in the various fields of study. There are many academic theories which can help this discipline in understanding the representation of culture. Cultural studies as a discipline has drawn from areas as varied as political economy, sociology, film studies, philosophy, and folklore theories. Since Cultural Studies depends on these subjects for examining the representation of culture in these theories, it is important to lay emphasis on these fields of study.

Folklore is one of the most important fields to be studied to acquire knowledge and question the representation of cultural beliefs and values for it can reflect the society in various forms. Feminism can help to build bridges across disciplines and an analysis of folkloric material from a feminist/gender perspective can lead to an understanding of how gender roles are naturalized in societies. While this should not be taken as an argument to nullify every kind of folk wisdom, there is a need to subject gender representation in folklore to a closer scrutiny than has generally been done.

To begin with, let us look at some of the most common assumptions regarding the role and status of women. Certain notions in society help to maintain sexual polarities—for instance, female members of a society are expected to be subordinate to their male counterparts. While we do have a few instances of matrilineal societies in the north east of India, if one looks at these societies from close quarters, one can see that even in such societies it is the male with whom actual power rests—in this case, it is the maternal uncle in Khasi

society. In the Khasi society it is believed that womenfolk enjoy the most significant position in society and the menfolk have no power. But in reality, authority and power always rest in the hands of the maternal uncles. Women are the custodians of property but the actual control is in the hands of the menfolk. According to I. M. Syiem:

Unlike patriarchy where lines of descent and authority are traced through the paternal males, in Khasi matriliney, descent follows the female line while control especially in traditional society, predominantly rests with the maternal males. In both cases, the males are the major decision-makers (qtd. in Chacko 46).

Consequently, both women and men unconsciously acquire value judgments that have been governed by such ideologies. Thus, representations are never “real” but shaped by ideology. Therefore, it is important to study the representation of woman in various literary genres to understand and critique these ideological attitudes.

In a developing country like India, Cultural Studies would do well to concentrate on folklore to understand the unequal distribution of power in society. Folk literatures, in general, and proverbs, in particular, enjoy popularity in every society and Assam is no exception to this. Considering its popularity and wide usage, proverb has been selected as the primary object of study in this present work through which the construction of womanhood and the politics of such representation in the context of folk literature will be examined.

As stated earlier proverb is one of the most important genres of folklore and it is classified as folk literature. Like other genres of folk literature, it is orally transmitted from one generation to another. Proverbs mirror the society. It may seem irrelevant to study proverbs in the present times considering the decline in their usage with the passage of time. But a careful observation presents a different picture. We can see that proverbs continue to be used in different contexts, e.g. the mass

media uses proverbs in different ways for different purposes. Hence, it is important to concentrate on Paremiology (study of Proverbs) in the modern context. This dissertation will be confined to an analysis of proverbs in Assamese. Proverbs belonging to the ethnic communities of Assam have not been included here.

It is important to examine the politics of representation to understand how womanhood is constructed in society. Such a study would provide a useful way of analysing the rather constrictive roles for women that gender stereotyping helps to generate. Gender Studies is a comparatively new field of research and the entry of gender theories into the field of folklore is even more recent. As a result, very few works of this nature have been attempted in India, in general, and Assam, in particular. The present work intends to analyse how images of womanhood are constructed in society by looking at the representation of women in Assamese folk literature with special reference to proverbs in Assamese. Since the main objective of this work is to study the construction of womanhood in society therefore, proverbs here are used only as the medium of study. Therefore, along with proverbs, other genres of folk literatures as well as some other items of folklore like folk beliefs, superstitions and customs have also been studied. The third chapter of this work presents a discussion of various folklore items based on which it attempts to examine the representation of woman in these pieces of literature.

1.2. Objective of the Study

A study of the representation of women in folk literature enables us to understand the ideological viewpoints of a particular society towards women. The present work will study how women are represented in folk literature, in general, and in women-related proverbs in the Assamese language, in particular. This dissertation will examine these proverbs in

three phases: the first phase involves the literal translation of proverbs collected from field work and from secondary sources. Next, it tries to analyze and interpret them with insights drawn from the areas of feminism and gender studies. All throughout the study is informed by a cultural studies perspective.

The main objectives of the present work are:

- To contextualize the Assamese proverbs collected from primary and secondary sources.
- To understand the politics of representation in oral literature with special reference to proverbs. It studies how representation helps in creating the various stereotypical models of a society and its culture and the role of language in creating such politics.
- To make a broad survey of the worldwide study of proverbs with special reference to such study in India and to find out whether representation of women has as yet been studied.
- To make use of a feminist perspective to analyse proverbs in Assamese and try to re-interpret them on the basis of those analyses.

1.3. Review of Literature

1.3.1. Works on Construction of Womanhood in General

With the growing awareness of women's status and position in the society, researchers from different places, have started doing research on the areas related to women's issues. One needs to observe the beliefs and practices regarding women and how they are represented in literature. With the growth of second-wave feminism during 1960-70, there has been a growth in researches on diverse issues relating to

women. The influence of Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, and Kate Millett on such studies has been tremendous and they have contributed to the overall growth of Feminism, Gender Studies and Women Studies. Several works on construction of womanhood have been written at different periods of time. In 1963 Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* where she criticized sex discrimination in societies and focuses on equal rights for women in society. Erik H. Erikson's article "Inner and Outer Space: Reflections on Womanhood" (1964) deals with how womanhood is created in a society and how female subjectivities are constructed. Robin Lakoff's article "Language and Women's Place" (1975) discusses how women are characterized as submissive characters in society and how language plays an important role in such constructs.

In India, works on such studies have also been done by many researchers. Hari S. Upadhyaya's article, "Mother-Daughter Relationship Patterns in the Hindu Joint Family: A Study Based Upon the Analysis of the Bhojpuri Folksongs of India" (1968) has depicted how women, in the role of mother and daughter, are represented in the Bhojpuri songs of India. In Meera Kosambi's essay, "Anandibai Joshee: Retrieving a Fragmented Feminist Image" (1996), female subjectivity is depicted with the example of Anandibai Joshee who was the first Maharashtrian woman to go abroad to qualify as a medical doctor. It examines Anadibai Joshi's life from a feminist viewpoint.

The number of theoretical works regarding construction of womanhood in Assam is far less in comparison to such works in the western societies. Aparna Mahanta's *Tagarar Dukkhh/ Dosh aru Anyanya Prabandha* (1999) is based on the analysis of the novel *Jivanar Bātat* (1944) by Bina Baruah based on feminist perspectives along with a brief description of the history of Feminism. There are some PhD

dissertations in the universities of Assam where researchers have worked on topics related to women. One of the topics is “Place of Women in Assamese Novels” by Mira Devi in 1993. This work has emphasised the representation of women in literary genres of Assam.

1.3.2. Works on Paremiology

Among the numerous Paremiological works Archer Taylor’s book *The Proverb* (1931) can be regarded as a pioneering work on Paremiology. “A Structural Analysis of Proverbs in a Sicilian Village” by Maureen J. Giovannini (1978) gives emphasis to the theoretical and methodological approaches generated by the study of myth and also explores proverbs and examines its cultural significance within the Sicilian village of Garre. The study illustrates how ethnographically relevant cognitive and evaluative themes can be encoded in proverb form. *Proverbs and Their Lessons* (2003) is a Paremiological book edited by Wolfgang Mieder which was originally published in 1853 by Richard Chenevix Trench with the title *On the Lessons in Proverbs* and consisted of six lectures that he had presented to Young Man’s Societies around Portsmouth, England. This book is an important and influential survey on the origin, nature, definition, meaning and significance of proverbs in the English-speaking world. Wolfgang Mieder’s *Proverbs, A Handbook* (2004) is another significant work of Paremiology.

There are a few research articles which have dealt with the theoretical aspects of proverbs in different languages of the world, e.g., John Bowering’s “Latin Aphorisms and Proverbs” (1872); Richard Jente’s “German Proverbs from the Orient” (1933) which tries to find out the original source of the German proverbs.

In India, most of the works on proverbs are not paremiological but paremiographical. Clifford Sawhney’s *The Book of Common and*

Uncommon Proverbs (2003) is a collection of over 1000 fully annotated proverbs which includes a list of proverbs from different countries including India. It includes proverbs from all over the world covering Africa, America, Burma, China, Japan along with proverbs from regional Indian languages like Assamese and other languages of the north-eastern region. Barun Kumar Chakrabarty's *Bānglā Probāde Sthān-Kāl-Pātra* (1979) is one of the pave-making works in the history of Bengali as well as Indian Proverb scholarship. He classifies proverbs and proverbial expressions into various themes such as gods and goddesses; fruits; fish; place; mythological characters family relationships etc. as reflected in Bengali proverbs.

Like the books on proverbs in other languages, the books on proverbs in Assamese are mostly paremiographical. P.R.T.Gordon's *Some Assamese Proverbs* (1896) is a collection of 300 proverbs in Assamese. It was one of the pioneering works on Assamese proverbs. *Dākar Bacan* by Dandiram Dutta (1961) and *Dāk Prabacan* by Nabin Ch. Sarma (1987) are collections of Assamese sayings. Prafulla Chandra Borua's *Assamese Proverbs (Asamīyā Prabacan)* (1962) is a collection of proverbs. This book consists of proverbs in Assamese language with their literal translation in Sanskrit, Hindi and English with other equivalent proverbs in Assamese. *Ratnakosh Vols. I & II* of Sahityaratna Chandradhar Borooah was first published in 1962 and reprinted in 1998. The second volume contains more than three thousand proverbs in Assamese with English translations. *Rāijar Mukhar Māt* (1988) compiled by Sayed Abdul Malik, is another collection of proverbs, maxims, adages found in the Assamese language. He arranged these proverbs topic-wise, e.g., proverbs related to rice, fish, birds, kings, common people, women, and family relationship. *Asamīyā Bhāṣār Alankār Phakarā Jojanā* (1990) by Jiban Chandra Koch is also a

paremiographical book. *Phakarā Jojanā* (2001) compiled by Harendra Nath Bhattacharya is another collection of Assamese proverbs. More than one thousand proverbs have been compiled in this book. Sarbeswar Rajguru's *Asamiyā Prabād* (2003) is one of the voluminous books consisting of almost eight thousand Assamese proverbs and other sub genres of proverbs. Though the book is paremiographical in nature, yet there is an introductory discussion on Paremiology, in general, and the scenario of Assamese Paremiology, in particular. The compiler time to time explains the contextual meaning of the proverbs and some historical evidences where necessary. *Prabād-Prabacan, Buranji, Baichitra Aru Bis'leşan* (2008) by Chakreswar Das is a book on proverbs in general. It includes interpretations, origin, history, and analyses of Assamese proverbs.

“Critical Study of the Dak-Bacanas with Special Reference to its Assamese Version” (2001) by Jyotish Bhagavati and “Proverbs in Family Life, A Contextual Study of Assamese Proverbs”(2006) by Mohini Goswami, are the two PhD dissertations which have critically analysed proverbs in Assamese.

1.3.3. Women and Proverbs

Works regarding construction of womanhood in folk literature in general and proverbs in particular can be seen in various parts of the world. *Folklore of Women* by T.F. Thiselton- Dyer (1906) includes all the women-related proverbs from all over the world including Assamese proverbs. Mary Ellen B. Lewis' “The Feminist Have Done It: Applied Folklore” (1974), Claire R. Farrer's “Introduction: Women and Folklore: Images and Genres” (1975) originally in *The Journal of American Folklore* deal with representation of women in folklore. *Never Marry a Woman with Big Feet, Women in Proverbs from Around the World* (2003) by Mineke Schipper includes a collection of women-

related proverbs from all over the world and analyses them from the feminist perspective and so it can be called a paremiographical as well as paremiological work.

Sheila K. Webster in “Women, Sex and Marriage in Moroccan Proverbs” (1982) and Hiroko Storm in “Women in Japanese Proverbs” (1992) observe Moroccan and Japanese proverbs respectively from the feminist perspective.

There are a few research articles and books regarding women and folk literature found in the Indian context, e.g. “Body Imagery in the Tamil Proverbs of South India” by Brenda E. F. Beck (1979) includes those Tamil proverbs that refer to the human body and its various parts along with other subjects like food images, animals and plants as well as of male and female contrasts in the proverbs of a given culture. In Bengali, the book *Bānglā Prabāde Nārīman* (1998) by Jayashree Bhattacharjee focuses on the portrayal of women in Bengali proverbs. This is more of a descriptive study than an analytical one. Ambalike Hiriyanna’s “Power and Gender Politics in Folk Literature” (2005) deals with Kannada folk literature and attempts to deliberate on the power and gender politics. It tries to find out the status of Indian women through that representative genre. Such types of studies are rarely seen in the Assamese context. Mohini Goswami’s PhD dissertation on proverbs mentioned earlier, includes a sub-chapter on women and Assamese Proverbs.

1.4. Methods and Methodology

The data, for the present work, have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data has been collected mainly from different areas of Nagaon, a district of central Assam, India. A few proverbs have also been collected from other regions of Assam such as

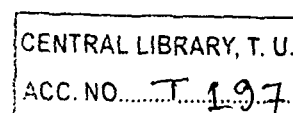
Barpeta, Jorhat and Golaghat. Several written materials, including the paremiographical works in Assamese, have been taken as the secondary sources. The present work concentrates only on proverbs in the Assamese language. Techniques like interview and observation have been used in the collection of data. These techniques have mainly been used in an informal way to gather information about the actual usage of proverbs and other folkloric items and more importantly, to understand the meaning and value that people attach to such items. Following the phase of collection, the researcher has tried to classify the available data. In order to fulfil this purpose, the data has been classified into different chapters and sub-chapters. Following this arrangement, different varieties of proverbs have been analyzed, interpreted and reexamined to make the work scientific as well as relevant to the present time.

The proposal for methodology has drawn on basic feminist assumptions regarding the representation of women in folklore. The philosophy that has provided the mooring of this work mainly centers around the work of various thinkers working in the field of gender and feminist theories, the most important of these, for the purpose of my study being Judith Butler. What has particularly been useful for me is the idea that gender is a performative role that one enacts repeatedly and incessantly without ever reaching a final destination (Butler 520).

1.5. Chapterization

The present work is classified into six chapters. What follows is a brief statement on the chapter-wise division of the progression of ideas.

The present chapter includes a general comment on the work. The objectives of the work, methodology, chapterization, and review of literature are included in this chapter.



The second chapter entitled “Construction of Womanhood: a Theoretical Overview” deals with the recent trends in ideas centering around the construction of gender, in general, and womanhood, in particular. In this context, several concepts that compulsorily figure in any discussions on gender such as representation, ideology, and hegemony have been looked at. The researcher also includes a brief history of feminism, the history of female subjectivity and a short statement on how women have been represented in Indian society from the Vedic period till date.

The third chapter entitled “Representation of Women in Different Genres of Assamese Folk Literature” observes the representation of woman in different genres of folk literature popular among the Assamese community and to that end it includes folk tales, myths, and legends. This chapter is based on the secondary sources of data such as the collections and compilations of books related to these fields of folklore. While talking about Assamese folk literature, it only refers to those folk literatures which are found in Assamese. The present study also tries to incorporate a historical overview of the Assamese society as well as a socio-historical background of the position of women in the Assamese society.

The fourth chapter entitled “Proverbs and its Scholarship” provides an idea about proverb, its definition, characteristics and origin. Along with this, the history of proverb scholarship around the world and in India and finally, also in Assam, have been stated. Proverb scholarship here includes both Paremiographical as well as Paremiological works. Along with all these descriptions, this chapter tries to bring out the gender bias of many paremiological works.

The fifth chapter entitled “Construction of Womanhood in Assamese Proverbs” deals with the construction of womanhood in the

proverbs and other allied genres of proverbs in Assamese. The women related proverbs have been analyzed under various subheads such as representation of female body in proverbs, phases of womanhood represented in proverbs, representation of woman in relation to kinship roles, and co-wife and step-mother motifs in proverbs. At the end of the chapter, the researcher tries to find out the current use of these proverbs and allied genres with the help of the questionnaire method.

The concluding chapter provides a summary of the whole work and describes the findings thereof. After analyzing the data in the light of gender studies, the work tries to point out some important research findings. The main aim of the work is to observe the construction of womanhood in society, in general, and in Assamese society, in particular, with the help of Assamese proverbs and other items of folklore. In other words, the present work tries to observe how women are represented in the various folklore genres of Assam giving importance to such representation in proverbs.

1.6. Limitations

This being a PhD dissertation, the researcher has worked under certain constraints—the most telling of these has been, of course, the need to complete the work within a specified time-frame. The researcher has therefore, felt the need to delimit the study. Considering the immense range of extant proverbs in the Assamese language, the study has been limited to those relating to the construction of womanhood. Though acutely aware of the treasure trove of ethnic folkloric material, the researcher has not included any discussion about proverbs in other languages of Assam.

1.7. Conclusion

In this introductory chapter the research problem, the aims and objectives of the work, its methods and methodologies, review of literature and chapterization have been briefly stated. The chapter to follow will present a discussion of the construction of female subjectivity by taking into cognizance inputs from the critical theories of feminism and gender studies.

CHAPTER II

Construction of Womanhood: A Theoretical Overview

2.1. Introduction

Social construction refers to those phenomena that are constructed by a society as against those phenomena that are natural givens. People, after interacting with one another, for generation after generation, internalize some ideas and behave accordingly as these ideas gradually come to occupy the status of law. These concepts become naturalized and with the passage of time these concepts come to be recognised by society as real and not social constructs.

Language plays a great role in generating social constructions. A child, after its entry into the world of language, comes to share the same set of assumptions and beliefs as real as the other members of the society into which he/she is born. In a society that sees everything through the patriarchal lens, the question over what a 'woman' is or what 'womanhood' represents demands critical inquiry. It is an accepted fact that, leaving apart her biological entity, the idea of womanhood is a social construct. It can be observed that people in a society are always identified by specific markers that are very often non-biological in nature. Pre-existent markers of womanhood are used to observe, and even judge, the extent to which a particular woman is able to approximate the ideal image. (Ardener 13) Thus, any essence of womanhood is seen through ideas already existing in a particular social

space. It is interesting to see how often in society pre-existing ideas of womanhood gets constructed as a 'reality'.

2.2. Issues of Gender

Gender Studies is a recent trend that examines different social constructions which attribute women and men as feminine and masculine entities. Broadly speaking, there are two aspects that Gender Studies includes while studying gender construction in society— one is to study gender in practice and the other is gender in representation or gender in performance. The former is based on a sociological point of view where the researcher has to study all those day-to-day practices that are related to women. For instance, if anyone takes a subject like the witch-hunting practice in the Dhemaji district of Assam, then it can be called as a work based on gender in practice. But gender in representation or gender in performance refers to those works which are based on the representation of women in any form of cultural text, literary or otherwise. For instance, if anyone has chosen to work on a topic like 'Women in the Novels of Charles Dickens', it would be an analysis of the representation of gender. The present work is based on the way in which gender is represented in folklore. The study is primarily based on an analysis of field-based data although the researcher also had to rely on secondary sources already documented by folklorists. While taking into account the representation of women in the folklore of Assam, the researcher has focused attention on an analysis of the way in which ideas of womanhood are generated and then naturalized by proverbs in the Assamese language.

2.3. Women in Indian Society

Having said that the present work is mainly based on an analysis of the representation of womanhood in Assamese folklore, the significance of the socio-cultural context of women's experiences for such a study can never be exaggerated. The feminist methodology on which this work bases itself acknowledges the importance of interdisciplinarity for such a study. Thus, a multipronged analysis has been attempted in the study to understand the implication of gendered representation in folklore.

In this context, it becomes imperative to take into account women's position in the social context. The way in which gender-related beliefs and practices are inculcated in males and females from birth is therefore important to examine.

2.3.1. Women and Health Related Practices

Discrimination against women can be seen in the various practices that are followed in a patriarchal society. The discrimination appears to be the most glaring in practices related to child-rearing, puberty, and marriage. People from all over the world have different child-rearing practices that women are supposed to follow. Child bearing and rearing are biological processes but practices related to these are socially constructed.

There are many practices and beliefs related to childbirth in the Assamese Hindu community. Among the Assamese Hindus there is a practice of quarantining the mother and the child from the family members. This period can extend upto twenty days for the boy child and thirty days for the girl child. This implies that the girl child is more profane than the boy child even at the time of birth. This separation of the 'clean' and the 'unclean', the 'sacred' and the 'profane' is symbolical of the later division between mother and child. While the

child can outgrow this stage of profanity, it can only do so by separating itself from the 'unclean' mother to gain entry into the father's world (Kristeva 3).

2.3.2. Women and Food

The gender-based hierarchies are most obvious in food-related practices of women. Woman's relationship to food is an indicator of her status in society. A Hindi proverb 'Aadmi ke dil ka raasta uske pet se hoke jaata hain' means to win a man's heart one has to satisfy him with good food. This implies that a woman's duty is to prepare good food for her husband or for her family and satisfy them. According to Patricia M. Gantt:

Simply put, food gives us far more than calories: It tells us who we are. The identification of self with food is especially well entrenched for women, whose traditional roles have required them to plan, shop for, prepare, serve and clean up after its consumption. Even for modern women this connection remains strong (63).

We can raise some important albeit fundamental questions regarding food. Who cooks food? Who serves it? Who gets first preference in taking the food? In the answers to these questions lie hidden the deep-seated prejudices that woman has always been a victim of. It is seen that in most Indian societies it is the woman who generally cooks as well as serves food while it is the man who gets first preference in taking the food. It is generally the mother or rather the women members of the family who are being served food at last. In a consumerist, patriarchal society a woman's relationship with food is indicative of her status in the power structure of a society. In these societies men always enjoy a greater and freer access to food than women. Man is the breadwinner of the family and so he must eat more: thus goes the logic. In fact, while a fat man is very often seen as prosperous, a fat woman, supposedly

someone who eats more than others, is treated as an aberration. As Cecilia Hartley says:

...women who do not maintain rigid control over the boundaries of their bodies, allowing them to grow, to become large and “unfeminine”, are treated with *dérision* in our society, and that derision is tied inextricably to the personal freedom of women. Women who are fat are said to have “let themselves go”. The very phrase connotes a loosening of restraints. Women in our society are bound (2010: 248).

Several social factors come in the way of a woman’s access to food. On the one hand, societal pressure makes a woman sacrifice her hunger for the sake of “propriety”. Secondly, in a typical Indian society, particularly in the joint family set-up, women cannot declare first right over food by superseding her male elders. Very often, as a result of these kinds of practices, women are seen to suffer from malnutrition and health hazards.

2.3.3. Women and Dress

Dress has always been an important marker of gender identity. According to Emma Tarlo:

To speak of clothes as if they present a dilemma in the Indian context is to challenge the conventional academic view that Indian was, till recently, neatly prescribed by caste or religious tradition, and that people dressed in the clothes dictated to them over generations (1).

In India, women’s dress has been traditionally seen as a marker of a community’s cultural identity. In fact, women are supposed to be the culture bearers of society. Preeti Kapur in her article, “Sharing Identity through Dress: The Case of Sikh Women” discusses the construction of women’s dress as the cultural identity of the society with the help of the case study on the Sikh women. According to her:

Dress is not everything about us. It is a symbolic code, and no symbolic code can fully cover meanings they inhabit and the material features of their existence are evaluated. An analysis

of the dress, *salwar-kameez*, as adorned by them it is argued, symbolizes and indicates that the world young girls share is constructed by various messages about being a girl, a young girl, who is a 'good' girl, who will then ultimately become an 'ideal Sikh woman'. The roots of identity formation lie deep within the socialization process of the keepers/teachers of tradition, the mother. Research in the Indian setting indicates the prescribed role Indian women play of being a good daughter, wife and mother, and a network of relationships arising thereof define their multiple roles and hence identities (101-102).

It has been seen that the dress of the Indian women stand for the cultural identity of the region. It is not only in the case of the Sikh women but for women everywhere and they are supposed to wear their traditional dresses in any traditional festival.

2.3.4. Women in Indian History

If we go through the history of Indian culture, we can have a fair idea about the status of Indian women in the past. It is imperative to take cognizance of the status of women in Indian societies in those days. The status of women in India has come across many ups and downs throughout history.

What was the structure of the Indian society in the early days, what is its condition in the present time, what are the social customs and institutions, who are the general preachers of behaviour in society, what should be their role in society are issues that should be studied to understand the social construction of gender in a patriarchal society like India. To understand the gender roles in a particular society, one needs to study the culture of that particular society as gender is culture specific. It varies from culture to culture. Cultures vary in gender roles and it is true in case of almost every society.

That division of labour was prevalent in Indian societies of the past is well known. However, a lot of work needs to be done in the area

of women in Indian history. Ancient Indian history can be divided into various stages and women sometimes enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than they did in some other period. It is said that in the Vedic period, women's position was almost equal to that of men. Men could not perform any ritual without the presence of their wives. Women could move around freely in the society of the time (Tewari and Tewari, 2009:35). They were free to read and learn equally with the men. According to Andal Narayanan:

Some of the Vedic poets were women. The Rig-Veda, the oldest known scripture in the world, containing hymns (suktas), was composed by as many as twenty seven women. Some of these hymns are frank expressions of their inner womanly desire for a loving husband, a happy and prosperous home life free from co-wives, and so on (20).

In the same Vedic period, women were represented negatively in many literary pieces. In the *Rgveda* itself, it is stated that women are fickle-minded and uncontrollable. (qtd. in Mukherjee 11). At one point of time there was a belief that in comparison to the other ages, women of the Vedic age enjoyed a greater degree of respectability and freedom. However, in recent times historians have dispelled many of these ideas as myths as, in reality, women seemed to have been suppressed by society and the patriarchal-value system was also prevalent at that time. Uma Chakraborty's comments on this Vedic Age is worth-mentioning:

Rg Vedic society brings us to another stage in the history of the subcontinent as it is among the most contested areas of our history today. Nineteenth century Hindu nationalists- mostly from the newly educated middle classes, always male and upper caste, romanticized this period. This was partly in order to establish the superiority of their traditions over those of their European conquerors but particularly because they needed to establish the high status of their women for some time in the past, as their condition was so evidently 'low' at the time they were writing. For them Rg Vedic society became the golden era as far as women were concerned...In the Family books-Mandalas II to VII, regarded as the earlier segments of the Rg Veda-only 22 hymns are addressed to the

Goddesses whereas 407 hymns are addressed to the Gods (42-43).

In spite of all this, it can be said that the Vedic period, especially during the period of R̥ g Veda offered women a comparatively higher position in society.

It must be pointed out that around the same time, in the hot deserts of Arabia, the birth of a female child was considered to be inauspicious and she was buried alive in the burning sand. Compared to this, the Rigvedic daughter was very fortunate. Even the later Vedic literature at times, shows total contempt and gloom at the birth of a female. Atharvaveda, which represents the religion of the masses, has numerous hymns to get a son and, the worse part of the story is that there are hymns to bring about a miscarriage of a female embryo (Kelkar and Gangavane 40).

During the Vedic period, certain roles of women were idealized and glorified. The mother was hailed as the most powerful and respectful person in the world. She had every right to give orders to her children and they were supposed to obey her orders under any circumstances.

As a mother, the woman asserts her creativity. As a mother, she is very powerful. She raised her children with conscious effort. For the Vedic people, the best facet of a woman was her motherhood. To felicitate someone, they would call that person mother (ibid 44).

It is interesting to look at the reason behind the respectable position in the family as well as in society during the Vedic period that mothers enjoyed. Women always had a deep relationship with the process of reproduction. In the early times, the concept of worshipping the Mother Goddess was widely prevalent in Indian societies. In this cult of worshipping, female reproduction is given supreme power and therefore, mothers were accorded a high status not only in the past but also in the modern time. In the words of Uma Chakraborty "...the first of religious expression for men and women is the psychological bond between mother and child, and that the 'life giving mother' appeared to have power over both life and death..."(41).

Women, in the role of wife, enjoyed a degree of privilege in all kinds of domestic and religious activities.

The wife in her role as woman of the house (grihini) looked after the entire household. Even a martial seer like Visvamitra admits that wife indeed is home...The first thing he expects from a woman is the looking after of the house. (Kelkar and Gangavane 43)

Though wives were highly praised here, all kinds of domestic activities were thrust upon her. Widows were not held in high esteem. In fact, widows had to suffer a lot during the Vedic period. Widowhood was like a curse upon that woman and she had to face varied forms of torture (ibid 45).

In spite of the hurdles on the way, many women writers rose to prominence during this period. Lopamudra, Bhirwara, Gargi, Godha, Ghosha, Viswavara, Apala, Maitreyi, Arundhati etc. were some of the women who were famous for their intellectual prowess (Sree 5).

In the Vedic period, there was a process called *Swayamvara*, a social process where the bride could choose her groom from a number of male members who were interested in marrying the girl. But it was the bride who decided who would be her husband. Thus, women had every right to choose their life partners according to their own choice. Moreover, women had at least some level of participation in decision-making bodies. The system of *Satidāh* was not prevalent during the Vedic age (ibid).

By examining the two epics of Indian culture, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*, we can derive some idea about the social status of women in ancient India. These epics are full of women characters who play out their roles in different contexts. Literary scholars and historians have unearthed different dimensions of the character of Sītā in the *Rāmāyana* in recent times. In the words of Uma Chakravarty:

The Ramayana is the most ideologically coherent of normative texts composed in early India which created role models for men and women. There are idealized brothers and sons in the text but the most powerful and long-lasting of these ideals is that of Sita, the long-suffering, patient, loving and faithful wife of Rama. The Sita ideal was the crystallization of the pativrata norm in the persona of a beautiful and dutiful wife, the chaste and passive embodiment of womanhood in Hindu mythology, which circulates even today (75).

In fact, the character of Sītā has acquired a normative status in Indian society; she is seen to be the representation of the ideal image of a woman. However, occasionally the character of Sītā has also been used to justify the stereotype of woman's cruelty.

Lakshmana, when unjustly rebuked by Sita for not paying attention to the false alarm raised by Marica imitating the voice of Rama, declared distressfully that women were impious, inconsistent, cruel by nature and that they alienated people by their very nature (Mukherjee 10).

While they were dominated and suppressed, women were represented as having degrading qualities like selfishness, cruelty, and jealousy. The saint Agastya held the view that women supported their husbands during their good days and left them while they were in distress. Being recognised as the Satī (the mythical figure that symbolizes unwavering faithfulness and undemanding love for her husband), Sītā is punished by her husband Rāma for the sake of society. Rāma shows more concern for the society than Sītā while taking the final decision of accepting her as his wife after their return from Lankā. In other words, the concept of justice, as understood in those days, did not hold good to the same extent in women as it did for men. So it has been seen that ultimately women could not undermine the decision that had been made by men. Like other women, Sītā had to comply with the decision of her husband and the society.

The character of Draupadī in the *Mahābhārata* presents a very interesting case study of the representation of women in Indian literature

of the ancient times. Like Sītā, she too, is regarded as the *Satī* or a chaste woman. From one point of view, Draupadī enjoyed a higher position in society than most other women. However, a close study of the text reveals that, in reality, she was also tortured by society and her position was degraded because of the patriarchal-value system. In the *Mahābhārata*, Bhīṣma opines that women are the roots of all misdeeds and so they, according to him, should not be trusted. In one of the chapters of that epic Pancacūḍa, a nymph, tells Nārada:

God created women with all kinds of vices and they were the worst possible sinners. They were so deadly that death, hell, snakes, all combined stood on one side and women on the other. They were falsehood incarnate, without the knowledge of the sastras or control of their senses and were obsessed with ornaments, dresses, food and drink (qtd. in Mukherjee 10).

Though it is Arjuna who wins the hand of Draupadī in the *Swayamvara*, she is forced to accept all the five Pandavas as her husbands going by the wish of Kuntī. Draupadī does not have a say in this. The strange irony in the situation, whether intended or otherwise, is too blunt to be missed. Apparently, while Kuntī, the mother of the Pandavas, is so powerful that the five sons cannot disobey her decision, Draupadī is forced to comply with the wishes of her mother-in-law. The result of the extraordinary suggestion made by Kuntī to her sons to share equally whatever they have managed to bring home results in Draupadī having to accept all the five Pandavas as her husbands.

Maharshee Manu in his *Manusmṛti*, probably in the 2nd century A.D., first wrote about the rules and regulations of the society and it is said that it was he who had imposed various restrictions on women. According to Uma Chakravarty:

The notion that the essential nature of women is vested in their sexuality is dealt with explicitly and directly by Manu, the most systematic of brahmana ideologues. After ruling that women must be guarded day and night, regardless of their age,

Manu gives us the reason for this surveillance. He argues that by carefully guarding the wife, the most important category of women for him, a man preserves his family, his lineage, the purity of his offspring, and his means of acquiring merit (71).

In his *Manusmṛti*, Manu puts forward many arguments in support of the domination of men over women. According to Manu, women should always be under control and under the power of men. They should stay inside the boundaries of the house. This idea is very well reflected in one of the Ślokas of *Manusmṛti*, which goes like this:

Sajyasanamalangkarang kamang krodhamanarjavan

Drhabhvang kucaryang ca strbhyo manurakalpayet. (Chapter 9, Sloka 17)

(Meaning: bed, seat and ornaments, sexual desires, anger, cruelty, enmity, wickedness etc. are easy things for women).

In this context, Narayanan remarks,

During the period of the Smritis- the period of codification of social laws- women were bracketed with 'sudras' and were denied the right to study the Vedas. Marriage or domestic life became compulsory for women and unquestioning devotion to and self-effacing service of their husbands their only duty. Women, of course, were protected at home and in society (21).

The process of 'othering' of woman was vigorously put into practice after Manu. In another Śloka, Manu expresses the view that drinking alcohol, making friendship with ill-minded people, widowhood, roaming from one place to another meaninglessly, sleeping at odd time, and living in someone else's house are the six bad habits which could ruin a woman.(Chapter 9, Śloka 13). Manu's role in framing codes of conduct for women to be followed down the ages cannot be exaggerated. Ancient India was thus not free from gender bias and prejudice.

Some historians believe that the position of women in Indian society was further degraded after the advent of the Mughals. Shakuntala Gupta in her book, *Women Development in India* (2005) observed the advent of the Mughals in this way:

The women's condition became worse and insecure during Mughal Period (12th century to 18th century). In Mughal period, Hindu society became more rigid towards women and the outsiders attacks were responsible for encouraging and evolving bad customs regarding women through which, women degraded. In Mughal Period, women were forcibly converted into Islam and married. So, consequently insecurity and instability further narrowed down women's social liberties. In such an environment, new evils emerged i.e. purdah, infanticide, dowry system, devadasi system, illiteracy, and other evils like show of gold and wealth and shaven head of widows (7).

The restrictions on women became more stringent during this period. Education for women was strictly prohibited and all kinds of tyrannical practices were in vogue. The Purdah system was started at that time. According to this system, women were supposed to wear a piece of cloth to cover their faces so that the male members of the family or society, in general, would not be able to look at them. Women were not even free to seek divorce from their husbands. Right to divorce was handed over to the male members of the society. As in all patriarchal societies, the biggest threat to the social order was seen to be women's sexuality and thus, it was imperative that this was brought under strict regulations. On one hand, it was felt that the greatest pain could be inflicted on a society by hurting its women and so acts of violence against women including crimes like rape increased during this period. On the other hand, some other historians strictly opposed the view that the advent of the Mughals did no harm to the position of women in Indian society. For instance, Adv. Irfan Engineer is of view that it is very wrong to say that the Mughals degraded the position of women.

This kind of statements is only given by the right-wing historians. In his words:

The ideology of right wing Hindu communal elements popularizes the belief that the only oppressors of Hindu women in medieval period were the Mughal aggressors. Otherwise everything else was hunky dory for the Hind women. No doubt all monarchs have oppressed peasants, landless, lower castes and women and the Mughal Emperors were no different in that respect (par. 4).

After the reign of the Mughals, came the colonial period in Indian history. While apparently the British tried to raise the position of women in Indian society by abolishing many of the traditional practices such as *sati*, they did so with a design. David Hardiman comments on such a design in this manner:

The British had always been highly critical of the way in which women were treated in India, seeing it as one of the chief markers of Indian social and cultural 'backwardness'. Indian social reformers had responded to this by demanding a ban on *sati*, an end to child marriage and an acceptance of widow remarriage by high-caste Hindus (105).

With the help of some social reformers of that period like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Swami Dayanand they introduced acts prohibiting practices such as *Sati*, widow remarriage, prohibition of child marriage, women's (whether married or unmarried) right to property.

Leaving aside some of the famous women of India, the position of women in general continued to be the same during this period. Thus, the position of women in India hardly underwent any change from the Vedic period till the modern age. While we talk about the status of women in the Indian context, we can always see a paradox in it. On the one hand, the Hindu religious scriptures represent women as the symbol of power and dignity. The concept of the Mother Goddess refers to the feminine creative power. For instance, the goddess Kālī is represented

as the symbol of supreme power who can destroy the bad elements from the society. The goddess Pārvatī is symbolized as the most powerful woman. Goddess Saraswatī and goddess Lakshmi are the female representations of knowledge and wealth respectively. On the other hand, if we look at Indian society we can see a paradox. While female power is worshipped by Hindus of both sexes, there are numerous instances of crimes against women in India. Cases of female infanticide frequently make the headlines of newspapers and magazines. In some areas of India, daughters are considered to be a curse and so they are killed. In earlier times, in certain areas of India, the girl child was sometimes killed by being dropped into a large bowl of milk or by being forced to eat a large amount of salt. In the modern age, when the woman becomes pregnant, the sex of the baby in the womb is determined and if it is a baby girl, it is aborted. In this process of female infanticide, the pregnant woman or the mother has no right to express her feeling. Thus, in reality, the woman's identity continues to be defined in terms of her male relations – father, husband or son. Thus, while she is worshipped as a goddess, she continues to be the 'other' of man. Manashi Mahanty observes:

In India the status of women cannot be defined simply. The existing inequalities and imbalances had resulted in differences in the impact of various forces of change on different groups of women. Today, it has become common practice for speakers addressing gatherings of women in India to tell them what a glorious past they had, what an honoured position they have at present and what a great future awaits them. She is always projected as Lakshmi, Saraswati and Durga. People always cite the example of Draupadi, Savitri, Sita, Indira Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu to prove that women have reached great heights of distinction and leadership (185).

2.4. Representation and Ideology

In the words of Berel Lang:

Representation is an exhibition or portrayal. By it, an object or state of affairs is shown, held up to view. It may thus afford the intimation of a reference; but if the viewer decides on an implied assertion, he does so with only nominal direction from the representation itself. A representation possesses unity or coherence, the implication of each element with every other, in a measure denied to presentational assertion by virtue of the latter's predicative structure (85).

Therefore, representation refers to an idea of the original object through varieties of mediums. The representation of women in cultural texts is an important point of consideration at this stage. Language itself is a representational system. Probably the earliest extant view on representation was expressed by Plato. Plato refers to representation while discussing about poets and their exclusion from the ideal republic. He says that representation is nothing but an imitation of the real object. He in his *Republic* mentions:

Every manufactured article, e.g. a bridle, gives occasion to three separate arts; of which one teaches how to use the thing, another how to make it, the third how to imitate it. The user alone possesses a scientific acquaintance with the thing, and instructs the maker how to make it; the latter, therefore, possesses correct opinion. On the other hand, the imitator cannot be said to possess either science or correct opinion, but only vague notions about the things which he imitates (372).

According to Plato, literature is 'merely' a representation of life and because of this reason he believed that poets do not have any place in his ideal state. Thus, apparently Plato did not regard any act of representation very highly as it was merely a copy of the original.

Representation is the symbol which stands for another object. It is said that literature is the representation of life. Representation is the basic concept for understanding aesthetics and semiotics as well as for understanding other theories related to politics and other social systems

(Mitchell 14). In other words, the concept of representation can be seen in every aspect of society and its culture. In Plato's view, literature is the representation of life and for this very reason, he has disapproved any literary piece from his 'ideal state'. He opines that as literature is the representation of life and as literature has depicted both 'good' and 'bad', so the spectator or the reader might acquire both 'good' and the 'bad' which again harm the people's psyche. Plato mainly gave stress on the disapproval of poetry. Here he has used the Greek term 'mimesis' which means to 'imitate'. He has said that poetry is the imitation or representation of that life which is supposed to be the real one but, in fact, it is not the true reality. It can rather be described as the virtual reality and the actual reality lies in the metaphysical world. So poetry is doubly imitated from the original object and hence, the poets along with the poetry should be banished from his 'ideal state'. Because of these reasons Plato opined that one should be very careful while representing something. To quote:

According to Plato, mimesis represents things in the realm of appearance rather than reality. Literary authors do not represent the real, metaphysical realm; indeed, they know nothing about it (only philosophers can glimpse metaphysical reality, and they tend not to be artists). These authors deal exclusively with the human and/or physical realm. In short, the literary author creates a verbal representation of something that is not fully real and not fully good. It gets even worse: the verbal representation is a mere 'image' of the things in our world (Nightingale 39).

According to Aristotle, all kinds of art forms can be called the modes of representation and it is a kind of human behaviour. In any form of literature, one is acted or stood for another object which is real and there is a difference between the real one and the other one which is used for representing the real one. W.J.T. Mitchell points out:

...representation is always of something or someone, by something or someone, to someone. It seems that only the third angle of representation need be a person: we can represent stones with dabs of paint or letters or sounds, but we can represent things only to people. The other two angles can be occupied by people but need not be: I can represent a man with a stone, or a stone with a man; but it would seem very odd to speak of representing either a stone or a man to a stone (12).

Again Aristotle said that representation differs from one another in three ways- object which is represented, the manner in which it is represented and the means which refer the materials that are used. Semiotics differentiates three types of representational relationship as icon, symbol and index. An iconic representation gives stress on resemblance, symbolic representation based on arbitrary stipulation and indexical representation is based on some cause and effect of objects (ibid 14).

Concept of ideology is very important to study for better understanding of the nature of representation of anything in different literary genres. The term ideology refers to mean the science of ideas. Karl Marx and Friederich Engels in their book, *The German Ideology* (1932) have discussed the concept of Ideology in society. They have discussed it in three ways; first, representing ideology as a class identity, secondly ideology as a distortion of reality and thirdly, ideology as a distant echo of a deeper reality. Ideology consists of a body of ideas and values that has been prevalent in society as a natural process. People unknowingly become the victims of acquiring that prevailing ideology in society. According to Marx and Engels, what is believed to be true by the ruling class, becomes the ideological views of the whole society which also includes the oppressed class. So ideology is considered to be the set of some fixed rules which cannot be disobeyed and people accept the ideas that have been carried by the ruling class as the ideas given by society as a whole. The most important thing is that this set of ideas is

accepted as the natural process of society by each of its members. Louis Pierre Althusser was another philosopher who also talked about the concept of ideology. He was a French Marxist philosopher. While commenting on Althusser's theory of ideology, Luke Ferretter says:

He [Althusser] means that ideology is primarily the kind of discourse that we do not consciously appropriate for ourselves, rationally judging it to be true. It is not the kind of discourse to which, having critically reflected upon it, a person makes a conscious act of assent. Rather, ideology comprises the stream of discourses, images and ideas that are all around us all the time, into which we are born, in which we grow up, and in which we live, think and act (77).

Althusser said that there are some institutions which help people in building up their ideology. He termed these institutions as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). He categorised various institutes of a society into different forms of ISA. In his words:

- the religious ISA (the system of the different churches),
- the educational ISA (the system of the different public and private schools),
- the family ISA,
- the political ISA (the political system, including the different parties),
- the trade union ISA,
- the communications ISA (press, radio and television, etc.),
- the cultural ISA (Literature, the Arts, sports etc.) (143).

Althusser's theory of ideology made a deep impact on the history of feminism. Like him, the feminists also believed that it is the numerous institutions of society which can help in developing the ideology of the people. Ideology can turn a constructed idea into a naturalized process. As mentioned by Althusser, the roles and habits of the people are already determined by various Ideological State Apparatuses through which people can accept a particular phenomenon as natural which is in fact ideologically constructed by a group of people from generation after

generation. The history of feminism has owed much to Althusser's concept of ideology. Althusser, while talking about ideology, referred to the Lacanian theory of the 'mirror image'. He said that ideology is nothing but an imagined relation between people and the real world. John Lye while referring to Althusser's theory of Ideology, said:

Ideology is an implicit, necessary part of meaning, or 'naturalizing', the injustices and omissions it inevitably creates, as power will be wielded by some person or class, and will pressure the understanding of the culture so that the exercise of power looks normal and right and violations appear as inevitabilities. It was clear in time past, for instance, why women were inferior. Women were physically weaker, more emotional, not as rational... (7).

Hence feminists took the help of Althusser's theory of ideology while observing women's oppression and inferior position in society. The present work also takes the help of Althusser's concept of ideology while analysing the construction of womanhood in society and their representation in Assamese proverbs.

It is important to discuss here the concept of Hegemony that has been propagated by Antonio Gramsci (Ransome 191). This act of accepting the false notion about what is real or actual as the natural process without any force domination can be called a hegemonic strategy by Gramsci and thus, ideology can be regarded as the real whereas it is not real but only false notion that people have in their minds. Ideology plays an important role while representing something by somebody because people must have a preconceived mind which can be reflected in that object or person which is represented. So while representing gender in general and women in particular, the role of ideology is worth mentioning. In the patriarchal society, people have a definite set of ideas regarding women and womanhood and thus, they are constructed whenever they are represented in literature. In such societies, women are always supposed to be subordinated and controlled

by the society as they (women) are considered to be the weaker section of the society. But the concept of ideology tries to show this subordination as the natural process of law which has relation with Gramsci's concept of Hegemony. Women, supposed to belong to the subordinate class, accept these ideas as a natural process as:

...the idea of Hegemony, as formulated by the Marxist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci....This suggests that, for the most part, control in modern societies is won and maintained by 'consent' to ruling ideas rather than through their direct imposition or the pure force of domination.....Thus ideology is seen to 'naturalize' an existing social order at a very deep level of everyday thoughts and action, but as being neither simply imposed nor irresistible (Brooker 112).

2.5. Subjectivity of Woman

The question concerning woman's subjectivity is a difficult one because the concept itself is not a natural one but a mere social construct. Imaging the concept of 'womanhood', we imagine a figure that behaves, talks, walks, smiles and so on in a specific manner that are already acknowledged as 'good' or 'bad'. It is interesting to examine thus, how different stages of a woman that is, girlhood, motherhood etc. have their own specific preconstruction. Traditionally women have been restrained by the patriarchal social constructs. According to Kate Millet, as quoted by Jasbir Jain and Supriya Agarwal in *Gender and Narrative*:

for women, bound by the conservative power structure of the patrilineal society the crisis as already stated, continues endlessly. The gender roles in a patriarchal society run on stereotypical lines. The sexual temperament, role and status are clearly marked- aggression, force and efficacy in the male and passivity, ignorance, docility, 'virtue' and ineffectuality in the female (36).

While talking about the concept of self and other, woman is said to be categorised the 'other' and her identity as the self or as an individual

entity can be said as invisible under the domain of the patriarchal-value system. The idea of the self for the male-centered psychology is that men are raised to be autonomous. Mothers are supposed to be the primary caretakers of children.

...boys have had to differentiate themselves from their mothers in order to establish firm gender identities. In contrast, girls have identified with their mothers and the resulting attachment has established the basis for empathic understanding of others' needs and experiences. Critical to the girl's preoedipal experience is her mother's double identification (Gillespie and Kubitschek 63).

A girl forms her identity by following the other female roles that she has observed from her childhood and her mother or her attendant may be her idols of imitation. She does not have to repress or reject this identification with her mother, rather she will be praised to follow her mother and other women in society. Sex role training is based on unconscious development so that girls become relatively oriented. Her identity always stands with other relations but cannot stand alone. While men are characterised as mature and rational, women are portrayed as emotional and weak which give women the caring attitude with the help of which women cannot judge things abstractly but act according to the particular context. As Diane Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek point out:

Self-centered and isolated, a woman in the first stage conceives of morality as imposed from without; in this unsocialised state, her primary concern is survival. In the second stage, she selflessly immerses herself in other people; defining morality by social conventions and traditional feminine goodness, she concerns herself with service. Selfishness is equated with immorality, with not 'being good'. In the third stage, a woman includes responsibilities to herself as well as to others, an inclusion that forms the basis for authentic emotional connections (68).

The female self is always related to other figures of the society, always relational and woman is supposed to be dependant on the man, her 'self'

is recognised as the 'other' but not as an individual self. So women have been lacking in their individual selves and specific space for their own. But they must need a particular space for identifying their own self. They also lack time as their own. They are supposed to develop their whole life for the others. They have to live in relation to others and so they are forced by society to think for others. They lack both time and space which are required for forging an identity which has recognition in society. But women seem to be regarded not as the self but as the other, not as the subject but as the object who are expected to be suppressed by society which is empowered by the male members of the community. According to Sigmund Freud, the states of mind of both women and men differ from each other because of their different psychological aspects. In female development, there is a process of transition from the choice of object. It is in her third line that she reaches the final normal female attitude, in which she takes her father as her object and finds her way to the feminine form of the Oedipus complex. So in case of the girl child, her attachment with her mother is very important for the creation of her identity. According to Freud "The phase of exclusive attachment to the mother, which may be called the pre-Oedipus phase possesses a far greater importance in women than it can have in men" (qtd. in Saguaro 24).

Jacques Lacan, another propagator of the Psychoanalytic theory, has advanced arguments in discussing the creation of identity. According to him, subjectivity can be created with the help of language. He has argued that a child, from six to eighteen months, can identify itself as a different entity from others which can be called the first stage of creating the selfhood.

The unity of self and other- infant and mother- is disrupted by the emergence of a third figure, the father. The terms 'mother' and 'father' are not to be taken literally in this context:

'mother' refers to the figure (any figure) to whom the infant is physically and emotionally closest in the early stages of its development, while 'father' indicates the social and cultural forces to which the child must adjust in order to develop into a subject. Beyond both the imaginary and the Symbolic lies what Lacan calls the real, namely what neither language nor culture are capable of naming and representing (Cavallaro 93-94).

So a child's identification of herself/ himself begins at the stage when it begins to recognize itself in the mirror. Lacanian 'Mirror stage' thus reflects the 'I' in a child. Lacan here compares the human psychology with that of the chimpanzee. According to him:

Where the chimpanzee is able to recognize that the mirror-image is an epistemological void, and to turn his attention elsewhere, the child has a perverse will to remain deluded. The child's attention is seized (capte) by the firm spatial relationships between its real body and its specular body... (Bowie 23).

The concept of Ideology has lots of power in constructing a human identity. To study the subjectivity of a person, it is the pre-conceived notions which occupy the total psyche of the human beings and thus, effect in the ideological views. Acquiring an individual identity generally begins when people enter the world of language. Before acquiring the patriarchal language, a child does not enter the ideological process. Then it only understands the mother's or the nursing woman's language which are basically full of gestures. The process of subjectivity is based on constructing the individual identity as a social being and the ideological overview on it. So the very process of formation of subjectivity is not free from gender bias. The process of subjectivity is so deeply rooted in the people's psyche that whenever a concept comes to their mind, they have an immediate idea of that concept that has automatically preoccupied their minds. While defining the female subjectivity, there are some kinds of ideological construction, which try to give them a subordinated position in society which is based on that

ideology which believes that the powerful section always tries to dominate the weaker section and this social asymmetry becomes possible because of the concept of hegemony in society. The concept of hegemony helps in constructing the human psyche which includes the psyche of the women who may accept their subordinated position in society as a naturalized process. So while the concept of female subjectivity is being discussed, the ideological construction of what a woman is or what a woman does etc. come to the people's mind. People generally have the ideological view that women are emotional, submissive, shy, hesitant as the Essentialists view them. According to the Essentialists' view, every human being or every object possesses some particular essences in them which are used in deciding their true characteristics as a human being or as an object. Essentialism is:

A term describing the assumption that human beings, objects, or texts possess underlying essences which define their 'true nature'. An 'essence' is fixed and unchanging, but has a double existence: as both the inherent or innate property of an individual object or being, and the abstract, external essence governing the type to which all examples conform (Brooker 74).

According to the essentialists, human beings have some universal qualities, some essence which categorize them into one class, as e.g., women all over the world possess the same essence which ties them together and so their emotions, feelings, expressions etc. are also the same. The essentialists believe that what is true in case of a girl or a woman is also true in case of the girls or women in general and the same thing happens in case of the boys or the men. Feminists have the view that while studying any literary piece related to women, there must be some essential female nature or experiences which are related to those writings. From this point of view the concept of Gynocriticism has been aroused.

Generally, it would seem that the social constructionist arguments (by way of alignments with materialist or historicizing thought, debates with psychoanalysis, deconstruction or postmodernism) have held sway: that indeed the boy itself, so often invoked in forms of biological essentialism as the unqualified determinant of man or woman's nature is understood as materially shaped by social ideologies and personal histories (ibid 75).

The Anti-Essentialists opine that as the Essentialists give views on universalisation of human qualities and categorise the whole class of women or men into one single class, it exerts some effort in creating stereotypical roles, or rather, in constructing gender in society. According to the Anti- Essentialists, everybody has his or her own nature and universalisation of people into one single class cannot be possible. They have argued that by accepting the essentialist views, we have to accept all those stereotypical roles of people as gendered subjects which is mere construction and again full of social prejudices and gender-biased activities. If we look at the views of the Anti-Essentialists, it seems that what they have argued are true only to some extent because what a woman of one society feels may not be felt in the same way by a women of another society. So the question of gender stereotyping does not arise. But at the same time it is not an easy task to ignore the opinions of the Essentialists because if we think that every human being is a different entity and differ from one another, then it would be quite difficult for the society to understand the nature of humanity, culture and in one word, the society as a whole. To understand the characteristics of a person, one should have ample knowledge of people as a social animal, their characteristics and behaviour as women and men. Only then can one understand a person in his individuality. Without any knowledge about the history of the people and their biological and cultural features, it is quite difficult to judge a person. So it is important to observe each human being as well as every

object from the point of view of the Essentialists. Here we can cite an example. The Essentialists are of view that everything or everybody possesses an underlying essence which determines them into one category (Hallett 2). So the feelings of an Assamese girl are similar to those of a Bengali girl or girls from America even if she belongs to another cultural ambience. The environment that they belong to may be different from one another but there are certain characteristics which are the same or rather universal. Therefore, while studying woman's behaviour or nature or about the representation of women in various literary and art forms, it is very essential to study those universal features that they possess. This is called the essence of their nature which ought to be understood in depth.

The concept of Ideology helps in naturalizing the state of things in society and the people's psyche is ready to accept what have been prevalent in society. We can talk here about the concept of commodity which was coined by Karl Marx. According to Marx, in capitalism, commodity is essential for marketing. Marx has the idea that as ideology naturalizes what society constructs, in capitalism, the labour or rather the dominated class considers itself to be an alienated class in society. Thus, they become the objects of commodity. Marx has used the term 'reification' while discussing this matter. According to him, in capitalism, the process of reification turns the subject into an object and thus, they are rendered into pieces of commodities. This kind of commodification does not happen in the case of the labour class alone but is true in the case of every class which is dominated, subordinated as the ruled class and weaker section. Women are supposed to fall in the category of the dominated class and so they are also depicted as an object of commodity. They have been subject to the ideology of judgement by the male gaze as the concept of gaze has its relation with

the eye. The male gaze seems to objectify women as 'good' or 'bad' according to their own choice for which women feel a kind of alienation from what they really are. Dani Cavallaro differentiates the term 'gaze' from other terms in this manner:

The gaze probes and masters. It penetrates and objectifies the body. A lot of the time, we simply 'see' things: we register certain sensations to do with light, colours and shapes without any ulterior motives. Sometimes we 'observe' things: we look at them carefully in order to find out about them in detail. Then there are times when we 'glance' at things: our eyes skim over them and caress their surfaces in a casual way. But when we gaze at things, our aim is to control them (131).

Therefore, women are supposed to be projected through the male gaze and they become the object of commodity. "Women have become objects or things to be appropriated, possessed and exchanged in the social relations of cooperation and competition among men" (Uberoi WS41).

In any communicative genre, women are portrayed as the objects of commodity, represented as the objects of male desire. They become the sex symbols of society. The devaluation of women as sex objects and commodities has been done mainly by the contemporary mass media. The common people easily tend to accept all those things shown by the media. By commodifying women, the mass media or other such communicative genres make the role and position of women limited in society. They may be portrayed either as the ideals or role models or as diabolic characters or in such a way that they become victims of subordination by society. As Patricia Uberoi points out "...the veritable deification of women in certain of their social roles: the pure virgin, the loyal and the obedient, wife and most importantly of all, the 'mother'" (ibid WS42).

In India, women are portrayed as the objects of worship which is again a kind of social construct. Women's position is supposed to be slightly exalted in India in comparison to the west. But the worshipping of women or their deification is actually another kind of patriarchal constraint. "...others argue that deification is but the 'flip' side of 'devaluation' in a bipolar value scheme which rests on constructing stereotypes of mother versus whore, wife versus vamp and so on." (ibid WS42). Worshipping women does not necessarily guarantee a higher status for them in society. In India, they are generally mythicized in order to be studied. "Myths have been regarded as another ploy to restrict women to a subordinate role." (Jain and Agarwal 41). According to Rosemary Tong "men discovered that one of the best ways to control women is to construct myths about her—myths meant to explain the unexplainable, to simplify the complex, to rationalize the irrational." (qtd. in Jain and Agarwal 41). Beauty is the main criteria of women and it is a priority of consideration in almost every society.

'The beauty myth', as Naomi Wolf calls it in her book by that name, has a powerful effect on all women. It consists of the belief that women must possess an immutable quality called 'beauty' in order to be successful and attractive to men. Our culture is permeated by the conviction that beauty is the central measure of women's worth (Kesselman, McNair and Schniedewind 92).

But the standards of beauty differ from people to people, society to society. What is considered to be beautiful by one society may not be considered so by another. The concept of beauty varies from time to time. People of earlier times in one particular society had different notions regarding the concept of beauty from the people belonging to later periods in the same society. Every society has its own norms regarding the definition of beauty and if a woman fails to fulfil those norms of the society that she belongs to, she is not regarded as a perfect woman. Sometimes such women are abused by society and labeled as

abnormal, evil, impious, and disobedient. By abusing these women, society wants to show that woman, lacking in the normative criteria should be condemned as bad or degrading. Their beauty depends on the male gaze, i.e., how the male members of the society wish to see them. The desires of the male members to observe the female members, initiate all kinds of representation and construction of womanhood in society. So society represents women in different ways in their different roles that they have to play in society. Women have been bestowed with certain norms which they have to keep in mind at any moment and should behave according to those norms. In every society, there are some do's and don'ts regarding women's behaviour.

Considerable importance is attached to the way a girl carries herself, the way she sits, stands and talks and interacts with others. A girl should walk with soft steps: so soft that they are barely audible to others. Taking long strides denotes masculinity...A girl has to be careful about her postures... To establish her feminine identity, a young girl should avoid masculine demeanour and behaviour (Dube 1988: WS16).

Representation of women in such a framework by the society is so deeply rooted in the people's psyche that it becomes difficult to remove. It is inside the process of socialisation and women, in particular, and people, in general, have been internalized by those stereotypical notions of the patriarchal society. They acquire all those biased concepts since their childhood days as homes and schools are the main institutions which help in strengthening the socialisation process. Stereotypical roles of both women and men and gender-biased concepts are so deeply rooted in such institutions that they cannot be easily abolished from society.

From the ancient time to the modern, women's position has always been at stake. They have no individual identity and they are regarded as the 'other' and not as the 'self' in the society. Feminist

movements, which have formally begun from the 19th and early 20th centuries, look into the relation between men as one group and women as another. Feminists try to abolish various social systems and laws which keep women servile, subordinate and the 'other'. It is the feminist movements which have taken the pioneering initiatives to remove the gender asymmetry that exists in society and restore women's equal rights and position along with their male counterparts. The feminist movements have tried to abolish those social practices which lower women into a secondary position in society. According to Feminism, most of the cultural objects of a society are constructed and based on patriarchal social norms. It looks into the relation between men as one group and women as another.

2.6. Text and Context in Cultural Studies

Text and context have special importance in the field of cultural studies. From the perspective of cultural studies, anything that bears a symbolic meaning can be called a text. According to Jeff Lewis:

The study of texts such as books, films, T.V. Programmes and musical recordings has emerged as a significant part of the humanities. Cultural Studies, however, has developed a particular technique of textual analysis, one which seeks to locate the text with its historical, material and cultural context. Thus rather than consider meaning to be something immanent in the text or as something which elevates art over all other aspects of life, cultural studies has treated texts as cultural documents. These documents cannot be separated from the circumstances and conditions of their production and consumption (35).

It is seen that documenting a text without its original context is not a meaningful act in cultural studies. In other words, text without its context has no meaning. To understand a particular text one has to understand its context which includes everything such as the

environment where it is practiced, the people associated with it, the intention behind the text and so on and so forth. Therefore, in cultural studies, text and context are two sides of the same coin, they cannot be separated from each other. It is, therefore, not possible to have a text without context or vice versa. It can be said that a text can be called the representation of a particular context; the text can also be called the documentation of a certain context. In this sense proverbs or other such literary pieces can be called the representation of life and society. They can stand as the bridge between the text and the context. In the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* it is thus, mentioned:

It is now generally accepted the literary works do not mimetically mirror cultural constellations, i.e., that they are not documents or transparent media which easily give access to an underlying (past) reality. But neither does literature seem to be a realm separated from reality. What complicates the matter even more is the fact that a 'context' is not the sum of given data, as suggested in positivist ('old historicist') accounts, but a 'text', too (90).

Since it is important to observe literary text to understand its context, the present work tries to look at the construction of womanhood in Assamese society, in particular, and the whole Assamese society, in general. The inclusion of feminist tools in studying folklore items is comparatively a new aspect of study. Feminists have given a new dimension of looking at folklore materials. In the *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music and Art* it is said:

The volumes on gender or women and folklore published since the mid-1970s demonstrate that folklore and feminism can contribute a new understanding of women's marginal status in defined cultural contexts. On the one hand, women's marginality in male-dominated cultures is imposed; patriarchy enforces the rule of men from the very center of a society's organizations (i.e., through the formation of laws, customs, and institutions that promote and preserve male domination) and leave women at its periphery. On the other hand, marginality encourages women to remain detached from the status quo (294).

As it is seen that feminism opened a new way of studying folklore items, it is important to know about the history of feminism. Therefore, a brief account of the history of feminism is mentioned here.

2.7. History of Feminism

If we study the history of Feminism in a systematic way, we can understand how this movement has been striving to ensure equality of status for women in society. It is a discourse which includes various movements, theories and philosophies related to gender differences and struggle for women's equality in society. To know the history of Feminism, the present work has taken help of earlier literature on these and *Feminism for Beginners* (1992) edited by Susan Alice Watkins, Marisa Rueda and Marta Rodriguez is one of such books. While talking about Feminism, it is important to mention about the writings of three authors—Mary Wollstonecraft and her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), John Stuart Mill and his essay “The Subjection of Women” (1869) and Margaret Fuller's *Women in the 19th Century* (1845). These are the three creations which have paved the way to the Feminist Movement.

Virginia Woolf in her famous essay “A Room of One's Own” views that for writing fiction a woman needs money and a room of her own. In other words, woman must be economically strong and must have a specific space of her own which can ensure her equal position in the society. According to her, women seem to be identified by other men. From ancient times, they have served as mirrors for men without any individual opinion on social matters. In a family based on patriarchal social values, woman is said to enjoy lesser importance than man though they have the same capabilities of doing something. She has

cited the example of an imaginary character, Judith Shakespeare, sister of William Shakespeare for comparison between them symbolising every girl and boy and tries to show how women are bound to sacrifice their lives in a patriarchal society. She states in this essay:

...his [Shakespeare's] extraordinarily gifted sister, let us suppose, remained at home. She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers (592).

By portraying that imaginary character, Woolf has tried to show the actual condition of every woman in society.

Feminism is a discourse that involves various movements, theories and philosophies which are concerned with the issue of gender difference. It tries to keep equality for women and also advocates for women's rights and interests. Feminists divided the Feminist movement into three waves—the first wave which was started during the 19th and the early 20th centuries. The first wave refers mainly to women's suffrage with women's right to vote.

The second wave started in the 1960s and 1970s which was concerned with the various ideas and actions for the women's liberation movement. It fought for women's legal and social equality. The third wave began mainly from the 1990s till the present time which was a continuation of the second wave feminism. Feminism refers to that movement which tries to change the subordinate condition of women in society. It is necessary to look at its origin and development to understand how women are constructed and dominated in every society and how it has tried to make society free from these construction and domination of women as well as all kinds of gender- biased activities

that prevail in society. During the time of the Feudal system, until the 18th century, kings and other such landowners ruled over the peasant sections. At that time the people's work was mostly related to activities at homes, farms or workshops and women and men worked together although their works and pay were different. But after the growth of industries, people made the system of division of labour on the basis of the two sexes and thus, men became the 'breadwinners' of the family and women became the 'housewife' (Watkins, Rueda and Rodriguez 8). During the time of the mid 18th century, there was a revolution against the feudal system by a group of enlightened people and so this period was called the Age of Enlightenment. Along with the protest against the feudal system, women also began to protest against their unequal status and the domestic tyranny of men. In the words of Jean Jaques Rousseau, an enlightenment philosopher:

Men and women are made for each other, but their mutual dependence is not equal. We could survive without them better than they could without us. They are dependent on our feelings, on the price we put on their merits, on the value we set on their attractions and on their virtues. Thus women's entire education should be planned in relation to men. To please men, to be useful to them, to win their love and respect, to raise them as children, to care for them as adults, counsel and console them, make their lives sweet and pleasant (ibid 11).

Mary Wollstonecraft was born in 1759 in England and she rebelled against all kinds of tyranny against women. She opened a girls' school in Newington Green, a north London suburb in 1783. Her famous book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* ((1792) can be called the first step towards modern feminism. According to her, domestic tyranny of men over women is the main obstacle which prevented women from getting equal status along with men in society. She fought for women's equal right— in education, in politics, in work places etc. Femininity, according to her is a mere construct of the society. The French

Revolution of 1789 has also some contributions regarding women's right in the society along with the efforts of Mary Wollstonecraft. In the United States, revolution against slavery flared up simultaneously along with the French Revolution in Europe. Rebellions between the blacks and the whites in the United States have affected both the black and white women. Black women were oppressed doubly in their society- first, they were blacks and secondly, they belonged to the women members of society.

The Afro-American Movement for women's rights was another feminist movement and one of the leaders of that movement was Sarah Mapp Douglass of Philadelphia who set up the Female Anti Slavery with Harriet Purvis, Sarah and Margretta Forten in 1833.

The Industrial Revolution geared up in the mid 19th century. Earlier, women had worked at home under the supervision of the male members of the family. Their works were related to the domestic environment. But during this period, women could come out of their houses and get engaged in jobs in factories. The working hours of those women lengthened but their wages became lower than the male workers. As their status did not undergo any change, the only way to become strong both economically and socially, was to get married to a person having good status in society. Women had no individual identities of their own.

John Stuart Mill, in his essay "The Subjection of Women", is of view that men and women are equal by birth but it is the surrounding environment and the education which makes them different from each other. In the real sense, femininity is merely a social construct and according to him, women should enjoy equal rights in every sphere of their lives (148-149).

'Social purity' feminism was started during 1870s and 80s. Emmeline Pankhurst of Manchester set up the women's Social and Political Union in 1903. Socialist Feminism is another type of Feminism and Flora Tristan was an early socialist feminist. Friedrich Engels was another socialist who in his book *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) mentioned that women's social position is not always secondary. He pointed out that in earlier society women might have equal status with their counterparts. He is the first who has searched for the source of the domination of women in society and has found that it is because of the economic necessity which has created gender asymmetry in society. It is he who first says that gender asymmetry in society is not a result of biological factors but because of the socialisation process. According to Engels, subordination of women in society is a natural phenomenon and is the result of particular historical and social facts. Historical Materialism is the main theory of Marxism which views that the process of history lies on the state between the social relations and the strength of social production. As woman is a part of society, her condition is determined by these processes. According to Marx-Engels, the cause of the subordination of woman is that woman is excluded from the social production or economy. Women's labour is private but not public and so she is categorised as 'lesser' human being in the socialisation process and if her labour is considered to be public, then she can enjoy equal position with man.

The German Social Democratic Party was inspired by Engel's ideas and in 1883, Auguste Bebel wrote *Woman under Socialism* on the basis of Engels' ideas. During that time, there was women's suffrage in Germany and Clara Zetkin, a social leader, became the chief leader of the women's movement at that time.

In Russia, Alexandra Kollontai was one of the leaders of the women's movement. In the 1920s, following the education for girls widely, she could engage herself in any work along with the domestic works. But in the 1930s, there was economic crisis following which jobs became fewer and women were abused in the work-places and the outside world.

During the time of World War II, women were sent for working outside their houses as men had to go for war. But after the war had finished, women were motivated by the society to stay home and do domestic works.

Simon de Beauvoir was one of the most important feminists belong to this century whose *The Second Sex* (1949) was an important contribution towards feminism. She was the first who used the term 'other' to refer to the female section of the society. In her book, she showed how society recognised women as the 'other', how they are categorised as the second class in society. It was this book which systematically showed differences between sex and gender and for the first time, criticised the existing social system which has believed that there are biological, psychological and economic asymmetry between woman and man. Beauvoir stated that a woman is born as a human being but she becomes a woman after the socialisation process. Patriarchal society has the belief that man is the 'one', woman is the 'other'. Woman is under man who is supposed to be natural and this viewpoint has been accepted by almost every woman. It was Simon de Beauvoir who first protested against this view.

In 1955, the Black Civil Rights' Movement was begun in the US protesting against the domination of the Blacks including Black women by the Whites. But some of the whites also supported this movement and Betty Friedan was one of them. Her book, *The Feminine Mystique*

published in 1963, was an influential book in the history of Feminist Movements. Different feminist organisations and movements were active at that time. The National Organisation of Women (NOW) was one of them. The Women's movement during 1970-79 could be of three types—Radical Feminism, Social Feminism and Liberal Feminism. According to the Radical feminists, the problem behind the oppression of women is the system of patriarchy because of which, males enjoy all kinds of power in the society and for that matter, they dominate the females. These feminists opined that women should campaign against this male domination over them. Women should try to create a specific space and culture of their own. According to the Socialist feminists, the problem is not only male domination over women but also class exploitation in society and actual freedom would be attained only after power and wealth were equally distributed between all members of the society. According to their viewpoint, women should join other oppressed groups in the society to achieve their goal. Liberal feminists stated that the problems of the oppression of women are related to social prejudices. People should try to correct the social system and women should demand the change of the legislative system where there should be more equal rights legislation and there should be more role models which can boost up the confidence of girls. Liberal feminists gave stress to the interference of women in the decision-making bodies.

French Feminism is a branch of Feminism which was supported by some feminists in France from the 1970s to the 1990s. It mainly gives importance to the theories of 'the body'. Julia Kristeva is one of the pioneers of this branch. In the 1970s, this branch approached feminism with the concept of 'écriture féminine' which means female or feminine writing. According to Helene Cixous, it can be observed that almost all the writings and philosophy are concerned with the

phallogocentric attitude and likewise Luce Irigaray, another French feminist, emphasizes 'writing from the body' as a subversive exercise (Castle 230).

Post-Feminism is the new trend after Feminism. It describes some viewpoints reacting to Feminism. It refers to the critical approaches to previous feminist discourses and basically challenges the second wave Feminism. This new approach of Feminism talks about feminine writing. Language plays an important role in the acquisition of one's culture. People acquire their mother tongue or any other languages from their childhood. But language itself is not free from patriarchal constructs. It was Monique Wittig, a French writer who discussed the problems of gender and language. Patriarchy helps man in creating a masculine writing where there is openness in describing the female body. French Feminists, therefore, opine that the female's biological behaviour can be felt by the females only and so they should follow a language which can be called feminine writing. Helene Cixous, in the essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*, says:

I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies- for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text- as into the world and into history by her own movement (875).

Cixous forces women to write about their own 'self'. According to her this feminine writing can be acquired by the child before the learning process of language has started because as the child starts acquiring a particular language, its psychology is violated by the patriarchal system of the society as language itself is a kind of male-dominated phenomenon. So feminine writing can be acquired before that when the child has relation only with its mother. Earlier it was believed that there

is no difference in the writings of woman and man. But modern Feminism defies this concept because language acquisition is different from person to person. The same language can be acquired and used differently by different people on the basis of their mental state, time and place. So woman also has her own way of writing according to her psychological and environmental set-up. With the help of her own way of expressing language, she can write about her own experiences in life, her understanding of various objects of the world etc. According to the modern philosophical view, human reality is determined by the language. We know the whole universe and all those things related to it through language and so our knowledge regarding all those matters depends on the extent of our acquisition of a language. Therefore, Feminism demands that as every community has its own language, so the woman should also have her own specific language. Along with the ensuring of equality to woman, nowadays, Feminism opines that woman and man are equal but different, they are not same and therefore, woman must have her own way of writing.

2.8. Conclusion

Construction of womanhood is not a biological phenomenon; rather it is based on society and human psychology. There is a background how female psychology has been detached and shaped differently from men. Construction of gender or rather, womanhood is so deeply rooted in the society, that people feel this as if it were the product of the natural world. In reality, from the birth of a child, people start behaving with them differently as boys and girls and have slowly taught them consciously or unconsciously, those things which make them feel that boys and girls are different from each other in different aspects. Monque Wittig says that considering women a natural group is not

natural but constructed by society. Women are ideologically recognised as a natural group but for women, the ideology itself is not natural but a social construction and both their bodies and minds are not free from patriarchal constructs. Women acquire an ideology which is not natural but pre-constructed. So the concept of women as well as women's oppression is supposed to be natural but in reality it is only an idea, but not the actual fact. It is actually a kind of myth. It is created by civilization as a whole and has made it a separate entity from men. So the concept of womanhood can be called a mythic construction which is imaginary formation. Their representation is itself a political one which helps society to oppress them and whoever opposes that politics of representation may be condemned as not being 'real' women or blamed them as deviations from the 'standard' social norms. There are some special natures of boys which differ from those of girls. For men, dominance over people and place is a very common characteristic. But society expects women to be characterized by emotional beings, shy, hesitant and if someone deviates from such qualities, she would be regarded as a bad woman or as being 'unreal'. Society expects women to behave in a particular manner ever since their childhood.

It is interesting to observe that Judith Butler, a renowned post-feminist gives a new dimension to the history of feminism. Her theory on gender performativity emphasizes homosexuality as not a deviated form of accepted norm of society, i.e., the heterosexuality. According to her gender is a performance. The concept of gender is not static but is a performance. It is Butler who paved the path of the theory like queer theory in feminism. Earlier there were many feminists who talked about gender equality, but they never talked about homosexuality as an accepted norm. Earlier, it was believed that heterosexuality is a natural or biological concept and so it is regarded as the normative model of the

society, but Butler opined that gender is a kind of performance which has been changing with the change of time. She here disagrees with Simone de Beauvoir with her famous concept that “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman” (267). It means that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 519).

According to Butler, gender is nothing but a performance which has no permanent position in society. The actor who has to play a particular role can play that role as a performance. So the performance of gender can vary from person to person and from time to time. While certain action is played repetitively by a particular section of people, it becomes a normative and accepted model of the society. Thus, gender enters in the naturalized process of society. Therefore, according to her, gender roles are arbitrary in nature. There is no intrinsic relationship between the actor and the gendered action and so one gendered role can be transformed into another gendered role. She advances this argument regarding gender transformation for emphasizing the concept of homosexuality as a natural process. Though in earlier times heterosexuality was considered to be an accepted norm of society, yet starting from her theory on gender performativity, homosexuality is not categorised as the ‘other’. In the view of Judith Butler the concept of sex is not a biological division of male and female but rather a historical idea of being a man or a woman. She again disagrees what Beauvoir opines here. According to Butler:

When Beauvoir claims that ‘woman’ is a historical idea and not a natural fact, she clearly underscores the distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity. To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the

body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman', it induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historical delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project (ibid 522).

Butler also talked about the politics of the human body, how the body is internalized in the stereotypical roles of the society. The body can be called signified as it can only be recognised with the appearance of gender and therefore, gender can be called the signifier of body. As it is said that the relationship between the signified and the signifier is arbitrary so the relationship between the body and its gender is also arbitrary in nature. It is the phenomenology which gives a naturalized concept of body and its gender. In other words, by performing a gendered role a particular body is considered to be natural. If a gendered body deviates from the stereotyped norms of the society, it is considered to be the 'other'.

CHAPTER III

Place of Women in Assamese Society and their Representation in Assamese Folk Genres

3.1. Language and Socio-Cultural Structure

Language plays an important role as a medium of communication. Every society consists of people having different culture, traditions, belief-systems and it is the language which reflects all these attitudes of any particular group of people in a society. According to P.H. Coetzee, “Language is one carrier of the cultural symbols and meaning of groups and so plays a crucial role in constructing social identities” (339).

By examining the patterns of a language, we can understand various dimensions of certain societies. For instance, people use the phrase ‘as white as snow’ in English to mean bright white colour. But the same colour can be described in Assamese by the phrase *gākhīrar dare bagā* (as white as milk) or *bagalīr dare bagā* (as white as the heron). This is a result of the social environment where a particular language is in use. Most of the European countries have snowy seasons and thus, people from those areas are accustomed with snow which consequently gets expressed through their language. On the other hand, there is no snowy season in a region like Assam. So instead of snow, milk or heron is used as metaphors to signify the intensity of the white colour as these two things are common sights in this part of the world. In the creation of a language, it is the social ambiance which matters most. It is important to mention here that the context of a linguistic expression is as much important as the expression of that text. To

understand and interpret a certain linguistic expression, one must know the context behind that particular text. For example, a proverbial expression in Assamese goes like this: *Mākat koi jīyek kājī, Dheki tharāre bante pāñji* which ironically means that the daughter is more skilled than the mother who can use the *dheñki* (a kind of pedal used for pounding rice) for *pāñji* i.e., a roll of cotton for spinning thread. To understand the term *dheñki* or this proverbial expression as a whole, one has to know Assamese society and its culture. *Dheñki* is an Assamese folklore item which belongs to the domain of material culture. As it is prevalent in Assamese society, so it is found in the Assamese language too. But this term may not be found in other languages if the item is not in use in those societies. Hence, there is an inter-relationship between society and its language which reflects the culture of that society. In the words of Claire J. Kramersch:

...the words people utter refer to common experience. They express facts, ideas or events that are communicable because they refer to a stock of knowledge about their authors' attitudes and beliefs, their point of view, that are also those of others. In both cases, language expresses cultural reality (3).

Language can be regarded as the bridge between a society and its culture. Because of the various feminist movements, gender is regarded as a major parameter for language variation. Gender-bias in language refers to the superior-inferior paradigms which are correlated with the gender of each person. To understand the role of the language in society, one has to examine the structure of that society. In every society both the sexes have been assigned their own duties. To understand the language pattern of a society, one needs to understand the social system of that society since language and society are inter-related (Sankaranarayanan, pars. 3, 4).

While examining a society from the point of view of gender studies, it is important to examine the linguistic structure of the people of that particular society. Most of the languages are sexist in nature. There are many words in different languages from which we can understand how womanhood is constructed in society. G. Sankaranarayanan, while talking about gender bias in Tamil language, mentions:

There are several terms used to denote woman. Of these, the terms pi:Tay, maTantai and maTava:r also have the meaning 'foolish person'. On the other hand, the term denoting man is a:N, which is related to the term a:Nmai, which means valour, boldness, etc. The word kaRpu meaning 'chastity' is associated only with women...The equivalent term for Sati in Tamil is uTankaTTai e:Ru and this practice was there in early Tamil society. All these illustrations indicate the inferior status attributed to woman by the society (par. 12).

Like Tamil or other languages, Assamese is not free from gender biased attitudes. There are many synonyms for woman in Assamese language which means inferior, weak, submissive e.g., the word *abalā* in Assamese, refers to a woman. It literally means weak. There is no equivalent word for man in this language. Another word *gr̥hinī* means the wife. It comes from the Sanskrit word *gr̥h* which means home. So one who stays at home or who is associated with the home is called *gr̥hinī*. Traditionally, the wife, in particular, or the woman, in general, is supposed to stay inside the house for looking after every member of that house. On the other hand, it is the husband, or rather the man folk, who is recognised as the breadwinner of the house. So he plays a superior role in the household. There are synonyms like *giri*, *pati*, *nāth*, *swāmi* for husband in the Assamese having the same meaning i.e., someone who is the master or who has a superior position in the household and it is a result of the patriarchal family pattern among the Assamese people.

Phrases like *bowāri-puwā* can reflect the idea how language plays an important role in the construction of femininity in Assamese society. The phrase refers to mean dawn or early in the morning. It consists of two words- *bowāri* (daughter-in-law) and *puwā* (morning). As in traditional Assamese society, dawn is the time when the daughter-in-law must get up from bed as she has to perform the household chores before the sun rises. As it is a part of Assamese culture, so this term is prevalent in that language. Hence, language can bridge between society and its culture.

The concept of the ideal and non-ideal woman can be found in the Assamese language and these reflect the patriarchal normative models for women in society e.g., there is a word in Assamese language called *kāji* according to the *Hemkosh*, an Assamese dictionary, it means a woman skilled in weaving and spinning. But there is no equivalent term for man skilled in such activities. Therefore, weaving skill is essential for a woman in traditional Assamese society. Another word, *Thupari* which means an unskilled woman or one who remains a spinster because she has no knowledge of weaving. As stated above in traditional Assamese society, weaving is one of the most important criteria that a woman must possess; otherwise she may not be considered for marriage. Hence, language plays an important role in constructing gender in society.

3.2. Inter-relation between Language and Folklore

As a medium of communication, language of a society helps in understanding the folklore of that society as folklore is transmitted orally from one generation to another with the help of that society's language. Folklore of a particular community refers to each and every

day-to-day practice of the people of that community. Myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles, customs and beliefs are different genres of folklore and it is the language of a society which bridges the folklore and its people. On the other hand, folklore can also help to understand and interpret a particular linguistic term. Therefore, both language and folklore are inter-related aspects of society. Folklore acts as the mirror of the society that reflects every aspect of the society.

The present chapter deals with various folk genres that are popular in Assamese society and it examines the place of woman in Assamese society with the help of her (woman's) representation in these genres which help in understanding the Assamese traditional society, mainly rural and agricultural, dependant on oral traditions. It emphasises the role of woman in such a society in agriculture, weaving, household work and childcare. The role of woman in social life, in various festivals, religious observations, emphasis on domestic roles along with agricultural works, weaving, have also been dealt with in this chapter. Moreover, the chapter concentrates only on the "mainstream" Assamese Hindu community for its study and the data are collected from secondary sources because the main area of the present work is Paremiology (study of proverbs) as well as paremiography (collection of proverbs) of the Assamese language which are centered on women and all the data will be used in the following chapters of this work.

3.3. Ideology of Femininity in Assamese Folk Genres

There is always a difference between what is biological and what is constructed by the ideologies of a society. Women's biology may take different shapes in the context of a society and most of the time it gets mixed with the culture of that particular society. Thus, society defines

various stereotypical traits for women as biological but in fact, they are not biological but ideologically constructed by the society. The folk genres may help in constructing the ideologies of femininity in the people's psyche as well as in creating stereotypes in the society. Women are always seen to be compared with the male standards of the society:

Women have traditionally been defined in relation to male standards and needs. Man is seen as strong, women weak, and this type of dichotomy is essential for perpetuating the superiority of males; woman has historically been viewed as man's subordinate, someone different from and inferior to him. 'Masculine' traits are socially desirable and valued, while 'feminine' ones are not---setting up another dichotomy that influences the ways the behavior of women and men is judged (Kesselman, McNair, Schniedewind 37).

It is the society or rather the social institutions which teach the girl how to acquire the feminine ideologies through a process of socialisation. Therefore, it is important to pay a closer attention to those ways through which women and girls learn to see themselves and their world through the patriarchal lens. In the patriarchal society of Assam, several norms for women are there like the concept of *mangalsūcak* (auspicious), *amangaliā* (inauspicious); *sulakhyaniā* (denoting auspiciousness), *kulakhyaniā* (denoting inauspiciousness); *sati* (chaste), *asati* (unchaste) which should be examined in terms of purity and pollution or profanity (*sucita* and *asucita*). All these kinds of concepts have been represented in the Assamese oral genres. Assamese oral/folk genres include four fields of folklore viz., folk literature, material culture, social folk customs and folk performing arts; but the present chapter deals only with a few genres like folktales, folk songs, legends, myths, folk beliefs, rituals that are found in Assamese society, excluding the other genres, for the researcher's own convenience. Folk genres produce an ideological base through their representation which helps in creating stereotypes in society. It is important to examine how the hegemonic

structure of those folk genres constructs such stereotypes. Women, as a part of those stereotypes, are found to be represented in those folk genres as socially unequal, economically weaker than their counterparts and more confined to their family as well as in the private domain. The present chapter deals with different processes of socialisation that have been taking place in the different stages of a woman's life with the help of various folk genres.

3.3.1. Construction of Femininity: At the Moment of Birth

A number of rituals and customs related to child-birth are popular in Assamese society. But the ways of practicing those customs vary in case of the two sexes. When a baby boy is born, the parents or the family members distribute fish among the near and dear ones but there is no such custom in case of the birth of a baby girl. Fish in Assamese society has a pious role. Mythically it is known as the first incarnation of Lord Visnu among His ten incarnations. The birth of a baby boy is an occasion of ecstasy and regarded as the blessing of God. On the other hand, there is nothing significant in giving birth to a baby girl and traditionally, there is no ritual of this type. Of course situations are seen to have undergone changes along with the passage of time and there are occasions where sweets are distributed among the people in case of the birth of a baby girl but it is not there traditionally and therefore, not mandatory.

3.3.2. Puberty Rites and Feminine Construction

A girl, in Assamese society, is given the position equivalent to that of a goddess before attaining puberty. She is called *kumāri* which according to the *Chandrakanta Abhidhan*, an Assamese Dictionary, means a virgin. According to this dictionary, it also refers to goddess *Durgā*. A girl, before her puberty, is elevated to the position of goddess *Durgā*

who, according to Hindu mythology, is regarded as one of the Mother Goddesses. Therefore, there are practices of worshipping the girl in her pre-pubertal period all over India. In the words of Leela Dube, “A pre-pubertal girl is looked upon as a manifestation of devi or Mother Goddess and is believed to be an anti-dote to evil spirits and the evil eye” (WS-13).

In Assam, this practice of worshipping the little girls is called *kumāri puḷā* (worshipping the pre-pubertal girls) which is held either on the eighth or on the ninth day of the *Durgā puḷā* or what is called *Nava Rātri* in the north of India. Thus, girls enjoy the glorified status of the goddess. Therefore, during the pre-pubertal period these girls are regarded as the symbols of purity. As soon as they attain puberty, they are considered to be profane. They are no more the embodiment of the goddess and thus become alienated from the norms of purity. During the period of attaining puberty, a girl has to follow a number of rituals not only in Assamese society but in other parts of India as well. This period is recognised as the first process of creation in a girl’s life which can be understood by different terms used for this period in different languages. Dube said, “In many Indian languages, menstruation is likened to the process of flowering or blossoming-the necessary stage before fruit can appear-and expressions such as ‘her body is full’, ‘it is ripe’, and ‘it is ready’ are common” (ibid).

In Assamese, the term *puṣpitā* means attaining puberty and *puṣputsav* refers to the ceremony regarding puberty. These two words come from the Sanskrit word *puṣpa* which means the flower. So this stage of a girl is compared with the flower as this stage gives the girl the reproductive capacity. Patriarchy naturalises this construction in such a manner that in spite of its biological aspects, it is believed that there is deep relation between puberty and the concept of purity and profanity.

These ritualistic behaviour help in acquiring that constructed relationship in the psyche of the people and thus, it helps in alienating women from the category of 'self' to 'other'. Most societies have their own rites and rituals regarding women's puberty. Such rites are prevalent in many Assamese Hindu societies. During the time of the first menstruation of a girl in Assamese society, she has to perform certain customs. During that period, a girl is not allowed to go outside the house or meet any men including her own father and brother. Many restrictions are imposed on her and she is kept under strict surveillance. There is a custom of transplanting a banana tree and prepare a *Bei* (a temporary ornamental bathing platform for a bride or a bridegroom) where the little girl, on the fourth and the seventh days from the first puberty, has to take her bath for purification. After that there are certain rituals that the girl has to follow for the performance of her marriage with the banana tree. This banana tree is quite obviously a phallic symbol and it is symbolical of her future husband and the girl acts as the bride of that tree. A pair of betel nut and leaf which is called the *kanāi* should be carried around by the girl during that period of time. This pair of betel nut and leaf symbolises her children. There is a folk song sung by some women during this period which goes like this:

Ābeli belikā o sonar śikali

Kanāi nuliābā o sonar śikali

Cilāe thāpe māri niba sonar śikali

Korobāt Rāmacandrar kapāl haise mukali

(Do not take out the *kanāi* outside in the evening otherwise the kite will snatch it. One man may get blessings as you become grown up.)

Here Rāmacandra refers to a symbolical use of bridegroom in general. In fact, Lord Rāma, according to the Hindus, is recognised as the ideal groom and ideal husband for the woman. Therefore, attaining

puberty is an indirect hint of being capable of getting married which is the first step of woman's sexuality as well as reproduction. This ceremony is very often pompously celebrated particularly among the 'lower' castes, to proudly announce to the world that the girl is now fit to be a mother as it is seen that gender stratification is always closely related with the politics of caste hierarchy.

In the *Manusmṛiti*, Manu mentions about *Varnasamkara*, the theory of mixed unions. It is a kind of exogamous marriage where both the bride and the bridegroom belong to different castes. It has two types—one is *Anuloma* or anthropologically hypergamy where the bridegroom belongs to a 'higher' caste and the bride belongs to the 'lower' and the other is *Pratiloma*, anthropologically hypogamy where the bridegroom is from 'lower' caste and the bride is from 'higher'. The former system of marriage is recognised as natural but the latter one is recognised as unnatural (Chakravarti 54). After getting information about the pubertal period of a girl belonging to 'lower' castes, men from different strata can come forward to marry her. Therefore, woman has no voice over her sexuality. In many ways this rite is an enactment of the actual marriage that would materialize eventually. A girl generally attains her puberty at around twelve to thirteen years and it is during this impressionable period that the 'necessity' of being a 'complete' wife by giving birth to children and looking after them gets firmly established in her mind. The puberty-rites show her that the main duties of a girl centers round the 'natural' fact of motherhood and hence, she has to abide by those rules which will help her in carrying out her natural duties.

Social customs help in constructing all those hegemonic structures of a society. Such kinds of impositions have been inculcated in the minds of both males and females from their childhood and these

are voluntarily ingrained through a process of socialisation. Generally, it is seen that it is the womenfolk who take the leading roles in the rituals related to girls' puberty. Here it seems that the 'voiceless' or the marginalised has attained a voice as they play an important role in such a situation. If we think deeply then we may question whether it is the actual voice or only the appearance. The politics of patriarchy has an important role in such ideological constructions. The practice of these puberty rites, in fact, tries to alienate woman from what is called pure. Therefore, it leads to the concept of alienating them from the normative models of the society and the very same girl, who was worshipped before puberty, is considered impure. She becomes alienated from her earlier frame after her puberty. In Assam there is a festival called *Sāṅth* where the goddess *Kāmākhyā* is believed to menstruate. In this period, there is a taboo in case of performing any kind of ritualistic performance. Thus, myths can influence the shaping of the ideology of people. They can help to build up various stereotypical roles of a woman as a mother or the feminine identity in society as a whole. The concept of purity and profanity is also there in case of the mother goddess almost everywhere in India.

As regards the cults, the advance towards anthropomorphism is marked by the belief current in Bengal that at the first burst of the rains in June-July, Mother Earth, in order to prepare herself for her fertilizing work, is supposed to menstruate. During this time there is an entire cessation from all ploughing, sowing and other farm work; widows abstain from eating rice (Crooke 1919:287).

On the one hand, the goddess *Kāmākhyā* is worshipped by the preacher of the *Śakti* cult irrespective of sexes while on the other, she is considered to be the symbol of profanity and thus leads to a kind of separation from the normative models of society.

3.3.3. Marriage and Wifehood

There is another belief among the Assamese that an unmarried woman is impure and this shows that the Hindu *śāstras* do not encourage nunnery. All women should be married for the sake of children. If a woman accepts a husband without marriage, then the ceremony of marriage must be celebrated any time before death or else their souls will never be pure (Rajkhowa 22).

Benudhar Rajkhowa, in his *Assamese Popular Superstition* (1920) collected popular superstitions related to animal, baby, barrenness, bed, dress, turmeric, women, marriage etc. and the most surprising thing is that there is not a single superstition regarding men found in the book whereas superstitions regarding women are forty-five in number. After getting married the woman in traditional Assamese society becomes subordinate to her husband and it is believed that a wife should not address her husband by name. The explanation in Rajkhowa's book goes like this- 'Only a person who is inferior or equal should be called by name. A husband is the 'mahā-guru' (the chief of the worshipped) of his wife' (108). Another belief goes like this—wife should not go on pilgrimage during the life-time of her husband explains that 'according to the Hindus, a husband is the chief object of worship to a wife. If she goes on a pilgrimage, it is naturally taken to mean that her husband is no longer in existence' (ibid).

Legend is an important genre of folk literature which may help in acquiring knowledge regarding different types of representation of women. It helps in creating stereotypes in the society. Almost every society has its own collection of legends. According to Ulo Valk:

In contrast to myths- grand narratives that function on the public scale- legends often remain hidden as local narratives, spread among small groups only. Also, many beliefs circulate in tradition as pre-narrative motifs, never used to build up

finished and polished narrative plots like those in migratory legends (13).

Legend is a kind of story with exaggeration which is believed to be true. Place-lore, stories of courage and sacrifice, supernatural deeds of great people, stories related to the existence of ghosts are, according to many folklorists, categorised as legends. Legends are popularised among people not in any specific time and space but they come spontaneously as a day-to-day practice among groups of people. It is simple in structure, limited in length, and there are no other stories related to it, i.e., one particular legend concentrates on one story. It is historical in nature. The story of Lachit Barphukan and Jaimati Kunwari can be categorised as historical legends of Assam. It is known to all how both these legendary characters sacrificed their lives for the sake of their country. The former was depicted as more chivalrous than the latter. But Jaimati, on the other hand, was depicted as a loyal and 'ideal' wife who had sacrificed her life for the sake of her husband which indirectly helped the country. Her name is always pronounced with the word *sati* (chaste woman) as she could go to the extent of embracing death for her husband Godapani. He was searched everywhere by King Sukapha with cold venom but he hid himself anyway from the sight of acquaintances in the hills of Nagaland. There he came across a Naga girl who saved him from numerous dangers. Godapani, during that time, was deep in love with Dalimi. On the other hand, Jaimati was arrested by the king's soldiers for drawing out information about Godapani. Though she knew everything about him, she uttered not a single word about him and so she was tortured a lot by the king. Finally, she had to accept death without revealing anything about her husband. Thus, she sacrificed her life and for this very reason she is still regarded as *sati* and everybody pays tribute to her memory. It can be said that she has been able to achieve the stereotype of an 'ideal woman'. On the other hand,

Gadapani may also be categorised as the 'ideal man' representing the qualities of an indomitable spirit and boldness though not sacrificing as his wife.

Another legendary character that is popular among the people of Assam is Janā Gābharu and there is an interesting ballad based on her personality. Janā Gābharu was a woman who was forced to marry a king. The king was very rude and he tortured her a lot. She had no option but to accept everything as her destiny. She is depicted as a woman of silent acceptance, voiceless, submissive, innocent and weak as an embodiment of an 'ideal woman'.

Most of the myths and mythical characters, popular among the people of Assam, are found in the *Kālikāpurāna*. The *Kālikāpurāna* is a form of *upapurāna* (a subdivision of the *Purāna*) composed in Assam. It deals mainly with the mythical stories of Śīva and Pārvatī as:

...Assam happened to be in the past a centre of Saivism and Saktism, particularly of the Tantric variety. Even today elements of Saivism and Saktism are very much prevalent at the folk level, and myths connected with Siva and the various forms of Mother Goddess are widely current. The medieval works like the Kalika Purana, the Yogini Tantra and the Hara-Gauri-Samvada were composed in this region and they contain myths concerning Siva and Sakti which are undoubtedly of local affiliation (Datta, Sarma and Das 38).

The eighth chapter of the *Kālikāpurāna* is all about the story about the birth of *Satī*, King Daksha's daughter. It was Daksha who worshipped Mahāmāyā. On being satisfied by his devotion, she blessed the king and asked him about his wish. King Daksha entreated her to take birth as his own daughter and accept Lord Śīva as her husband. Mahāmāyā fulfilled his wishes and took birth as his daughter (63-74). In the ninth chapter of the *Kālikāpurāna*, there is description of how she worshipped Lord Śīva with different elements in different months of the year to have him as her husband. From childhood itself, she has been depicted as the

worshipper of Lord Śiva, who would become her husband. She kept on maintaining her *vrata* (fasting) every month with different ingredients with the sole objective of winning him as her husband (75-83). It can be said that in traditional Assamese society, a girl is taught from her very childhood to worship God for being blessed with a ‘good’ or worthy groom. On the other hand, it can also be said that the husband must be worshipped by his wife. Marriage was, therefore, the main goal of a woman and it was almost compulsory for every woman to worship her husband as God.

3.3.4. Female Beauty, Sexuality and the Concept of ‘Ideal Woman’

In almost every Assamese folk genre, woman has always been depicted as the object of beauty which should be admired and which is one of the most compulsory features for her so that she can attract her male counterpart. Beauty seems to be the main criterion of woman e.g., there was a belief that it was Brahmā and Viṣṇu who advised Śiva to marry a beautiful woman as it was important for creation. While discussing this matter, both Brahmā and Viṣṇu stressed on the concept of beauty while selecting a bride. It was Śiva who asked both of them whether there was anyone who could be sexually attractive and who had knowledge about the duties of an ‘ideal wife’. Finally, they suggested Śiva to marry Satī, Daksha’s daughter who had all the features of an ideal wife (Kālikāpurāna, 9th chapter 75-83).

Another myth regarding Satī’s marriage with Lord Śiva narrates how he was worshipped by the other gods and goddesses and how Viṣṇu blessed him after his marriage with Dakshāyini, King Daksha’s daughter. Viṣṇu showered his blessings on him for a happy life with her as he himself had been staying with his wife goddess Kamalā or Lakshmī. Finally he declared that whoever was attracted by Satī sexually, must be killed at once by Lord Śiva. Once Lord Brahmā was

sexually attracted by Satī and after coming to know about this, Śiva was so infuriated with him and he ran after Brahmā to kill him. It was again Viṣṇu who prevented Śiva from killing Brahmā by saying that Brahmā is the creator. It is necessary to maintain a balance among creation, survival and destruction which are done by Brahmā, Viṣṇu himself and Śiva respectively. The three of them have in fact one single soul and no one among them could be killed. It would be disastrous if Śiva killed Brahmā. Finally, Śiva understood Viṣṇu and abandoned the idea of killing Brahmā (Kālikāpurāna, 11th chapter 96-105). What is worth-noting is that despite being a goddess, Dakshāyini or Satī is looked at as a sex-object. Even the creator of the world was sexually attracted by the beauty of the goddess. Even if she is recognised as a goddess in certain aspects but in fact she, being a woman, is not spared of the gaze of the male gods.

It is very interesting to note that most of the popular superstitions that are prevalent among the people of Assam represent different do's and don'ts regarding women.

Superstition is, in its essence, nothing but knowledge for masses. It is a handy reference book for the uneducated. It contains the collective wisdom of the men of experience. It is hallowed by Time. Its basis is Religion: hence it is the best incentive to action (Rajkhowa 13).

Here we can cite the example of witch-hunting practices popular in some areas of Assam in the name of superstition. Of course there are other reasons behind this practice which are beyond superstition. Sometimes in rural areas, women who are economically strong have to face lots of difficulties in life. Economic aspect may be one of the main reasons in case of witch-hunting. This practice is popular even in this era of science and technology. In the daily newspapers, we come across numerous news and stories about witch-hunting. Women are projected

as witches without any scientific basis. In spite of attempts from different quarters, nobody is able to prevent people from following such practices. Most interestingly, a woman, who is caught under the frame of witch-hunting, is either a widow or an old unmarried woman who lives alone or who has her own property (Munshi 277). It may be out of greed for her property or may be for some other reasons that women have to suffer and finally accept death. Surprisingly, even people with influence and power fail to protect such women, cannot help them or rather nobody outside that particular family wants to provide information regarding these matters. It is because of the fear and superstitious beliefs that people accept such an inhuman act without any protest. Women who generally do not fall under the category of 'ideal woman', or who do not or cannot follow the normative models of the society she lives in, are considered to be witches and finally killed by those who want to see them dead. On the other hand, a woman who fulfils all the normative models of a society is recognised as an 'ideal woman'. She may sometimes be worshipped by the people considering her to be a goddess.

Almost every Assamese folktale reflects women's household arrangement skills and thrifty housewifery. Women are shown to be basically unthrifty, careless, spendthrift and these are criticised in the tales, while thrifty housewives are praised for that quality. In the folktale "Lakhimi Tiroṭā", a woman, who is represented as the youngest daughter-in-law of a household, is recognised as the Lakhimi Tiroṭā. She is auspicious as she is very thrifty and she advises to every member of the household not to be spendthrift but earn and save money with concern for the future. Here woman is represented as the keeper of the whole family and all the men are the breadwinners but have little knowledge of saving property. She is the person who shows them

directions in such activities. Women are represented as the housekeeper but not the breadwinner who has to look after the whole house and its members. She should have the quality to keep the house in a systematic way. It is very rare when women are represented as the breadwinners of the family. On one hand, it is the men who perform the role of breadwinners but it is women who have to be active and alert in running household smoothly.

Construction of women in the line of these patriarchal norms is common in almost every folklore item. Most of the Assamese folktales, proverbs, riddles, folksongs represent women's physical structures and beliefs associated with these. Representation of such beliefs is quite common as all these beliefs are prevalent among the people of traditional Assamese society and in the psyche of its people. Therefore, there are superstitions like a woman with short and ragged hair is unlucky as the traditional Assamese society believes that the principal feature of beauty in a woman is long, smooth and straight hair. It is believed that a woman would lose her husband if she possesses a pimple on the chin, cheek or nose. This makes it difficult for her to secure a husband. From this, arose the belief that if she ever succeeds in securing a husband, she will lose him. There are lots of do's and don'ts concerning women among the Assamese minds like a woman with her husband alive should always have a red spot of vermilion on her forehead, she should not be without a pair of ear-ring on her ears, while walking she should not produce any sound with her feet, she should speak in a low tone.

Demonology is another eminent folklore item which comes under legend and it is important from the gender studies view point. It is interesting to observe how the concept of female spirits is prevalent in the traditional societies of any area in general and traditional Assamese

society in particular which will help in understanding how femininity is constructed in society. Doing research on demonology seems to have no scientific value at all but in fact such research helps in knowing the people's psyche of a particular society. Benudhar Rajkhowa, in his book *Assamese Demonology* (1905), made a list of supernatural spirits that were prevalent in the minds of the Assamese people. He divided those spirits as males and females with their physical descriptions along with their behavioural patterns and their eating habits according to the popular beliefs in that society. Most interestingly, the female spirits are generally depicted as more benevolent and less harmful than the male spirits. Sometimes the meaning of their names has resemblance with that of the stereotypical natures of a traditional woman, e.g., *Ghar-jeuti* is categorised as a household spirit. The term *ghar-jeuti* consists of two words—*ghar* means house and *jeuti* means light and therefore, the term literally means 'the light of the house'. In the words of Benudhar Rajkhowa:

This is a benign female spirit who presides over a man's house. She is heard to make ticking sounds in the house. When a man happens to sleep at night across the doorway she treads on his body on her way out of or into the house, and the man feels the treading as that of a cat passing over him (133).

This female spirit is believed to be benevolent in nature and which stay inside the house. So, constructed femininity even finds its way into the supernatural world. The highlights of femininity are believed to be kindness, love, and docility and the most important construction is that of the relation between domestic space and femininity. The name *ghar-jeuti* (the light of the house) proves this stereotypical image of the ideal woman.

3.4. Representation of Pativrata woman in Assamese Folk genres

In case of religious scriptures we can have an idea about the construction of womanhood. *Lakhir Pāñchāli* is a popular kind of Assamese or rather Hindu religious scripture where there are descriptions of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. The word *Pāñchāli* refers to a kind of descriptive essay consisting of the description of one's own life. This religious text consists of ideas regarding ideal womanhood. There are descriptions about the characteristics of a *pativrata* woman, i.e., a woman who obeys her husband and accepts him as equal to the gods. According to this scripture, it is prestigious to be born a woman and lead the life of a woman. All these pieces of advice are meant for all women and are written in such a manner as if these were the words spoken by goddess *Lakshmi* herself. But all the notions in connection with women are nothing but construction of patriarchal value system which is meant to subordinate women.

The goddess Kāmākhya and myths related to her are an important feature of this region. The cult of the mother goddess can be traced in the various myths centering round the goddess Kāmākhya. The famous Kāmākhya temple is situated at Guwahati up on the Nilachal hills. There are many myths related to this temple along with the goddess. There is a myth which goes like this: when Brahmā and Viṣṇu were creating the world, Śiva was deep in meditation and stayed away from creation. In order to wake up Śiva, Brahmā asked his son Daksa to marry his beautiful daughter to Śiva. Śiva and Satī lived happily together on the Kailāsa mountain; years passed and Daksa decided to arrange a huge sacrificial ritual. People from all over the continent were invited. But the king did not invite Śiva to that function which disappointed Satī. She went to that function without any invitation just to have a look at what was happening there. There she heard harsh

insulting words against Śiva uttered by her father himself. She became furious and jumped into the sacred pyre in front of the people. The news reached Śiva's ears and he came rushing to retrieving his wife. He became angry and started dancing *Tāndava*, a dance-form which was performed by him while he was in angry mood. Looking at that horrible sight, Viṣṇu decided to cut Satī's body into pieces with his *Sudarśana cakra*. Her mutilated body was scattered all over India and the female genital fell on the Nilachal hill where the famous Kāmākhyā temple is located (Valk 11-12).

3.5. Representation of Motherhood in Assamese Folk Genres

Women and motherhood are closely inter-related concepts of any society and it is believed that attaining motherhood is the greatest achievement of every woman. It is a well-established fact that the pre-conceived notion that attaining motherhood is the principal aim of each woman finds favour with many in society. It is a kind of indirect hint to the view that a woman's place is in the home and her main duty is to bear children and to nurture them.

Stereotypically in every sphere of society, two concepts are prevalent regarding women. On the one hand, woman is considered to be the 'other', her body is supposed to be profane because of the menstrual cycle, she is represented as the source of moral and physical degradation of man, she may wreak havoc and bring destruction. On the other hand, woman as mother is recognised as the symbol of purity, love and care. When we say that attaining motherhood is the biggest achievement of every woman, it helps to generate the image of woman as child bearer and nurturer of children. This, in turn, leads to the idea that bringing up children is the sole duty of the mother thereby limiting

her role to the private domain. As child-bearing and nurturing are considered to be her primary roles, it shuts off the other possibilities in her life that are beyond the realms of the home. Gradually sexuality, motherhood, household works come to be the main duties of woman for which she becomes economically dependent on her counterparts. (Sengupta 45).

A woman's ability to bear children is of course a biological fact; nature has bestowed her with the unique ability to create life in her womb. However, feminist discourses all over the world have been able to highlight the obvious disparity between a woman's biological and socio-cultural roles. It is quite clear that all the issues surrounding the question of motherhood are not merely biological. For instance, it is contestable that the image of the mother in Indian societies as the all-sacrificing and all-forgiving benefactress is constructed. Right from her very childhood a girl is trained to become a 'perfect mother'.

It is important to study different folk genres as they can be called the mirror of a particular society. It is essential to look at the construction of the idea of motherhood and the politics of such construction with particular reference to Assamese Hindu society. Different folk genres such as folktales, myths, legends, folk songs, rites, beliefs and superstitions depict different aspects of motherhood. Social customs help in constructing all those hegemonic structures of a society. According to Nancy J. Chodorow:

...women's mothering, like other aspects of gender activity, is a product of feminine role training and role identification. Girls are taught to be mothers, trained for nurturance, and told that they ought to mother....They 'identify' with their own mothers as they grow up, and this identification produces the girl as a mother... (31).

Any narrative can help in acquiring an idea about a particular society, its people and their psyche. Lawler in the article, "Stories and the Social

World” has quoted Ricoeur while discussing about the nature of narratives like this, “narrative is a key means through which people understand and make sense of the social world, and of their place within it. The world is intelligible because we can situate it within a story” (33).

In case of folk genres, narrative refers mainly to folktales, myths and legends. Different parameters of motherhood can be seen in most of the narratives of these kinds. It is said that the relationship between the mother and the daughter is always very sweet and a kind of emotional bonding is always there between them. Generally, every woman has a loving and sympathetic attachment towards her daughter. The daughter also considers her mother as a protector and depends on her in case of difficulties. Even if she is more obliged to her father as a part of the patriarchal society and as head of the family, her mother is her principal supervisor as most of the time she (the daughter) stays at home and this practice of supervising can mostly be seen after the daughter’s entering the period of adolescence. (Upadhyaya 217). Thus, a special relationship grows between these two roles of women.

Among the Assamese society, this sort of mother-daughter relationship can be seen in various practices. For example, there is a popular term *Āi-olowā* in Assamese which literally means the visitation of the mother. It is a kind of disease which is known as small pox according to the *Chandrakanta Abhidhan*. Here *Āi* or *Śitalā* is believed to be a female spirit which is worshipped during the suffering of this disease. According to this dictionary, *Śitalā* refers to a goddess supposed to preside over cases of small pox. The term *Śitalā* may come from the word *Śīt* which means ‘cool’. So this spirit is depicted as being benevolent in nature through which it can be understood that the representation of femininity is expected to be benevolent, mild and soft in nature. The term *Āi* refers to the same spirit like *Śitalā* which means

mother in the Assamese language. The mother figure, in most of the societies, always refers to someone who has only love, care, and sacrifice towards her children and thus the spirit *Āi* is depicted in the same manner. There is a belief that when a person suffers from this disease, the other members, especially the women of that particular family, should organise an *Āi-sabāh*, a public worship. In this ritual three or five or any odd numbers of little girls who have not attained their puberty, are worshipped and served sweets for the cure of the afflicted person. It is believed that these little girls are the symbols of the spirit *Āi* and by satisfying them the spirit can be placated. This may symbolise the mother-daughter relationship as it is believed that the goddess *Āi* or *Śītalā* will be happy if the little girls are satisfied. It may also give the idea about the emotional relationship between these two roles of women and it seems that the mother is always the protector of her daughter from her childhood. Another example of mother-daughter relationship can be understood from an Assamese folk song which goes like this:

Berate kāndiḡe ughāre cereki
Saalate kāndise māko
Jīyekar maramat māke kāndiḡe
Tok di kenekai thāko?

(The mother is describing her love towards her daughter and she is weeping as her daughter will leave her parental house after marriage).

The mother can be called the main preacher in a girl's life. It is the mother who is supposed to be the counsellor of a girl. She counsels her how to become a 'good woman' and how to become submissive and soft-spoken and to be skilled in household activities e.g.,

Āi lāhekai khoj kārhibā, khojat padum phulābā
Padum pāte pāte sonar sangsār racibā

Gosāi gharo mocibā, sadāi sākī jalābā, śāhuk bhakti karibā, śāhurak bhakti karibā,

Ālahi āhile hāhi mukhe olāba, deor nanand hatak maramere mātibā,

Maram dibā jetiā, maram pābā tetiā,

Bowārīr sin swarupe oranikhan neribā.

Gharkhanar mangal hauk bhagavānak khātibā

This folk song is sung during the time of marriage advising what and how a girl should behave after marriage. It talks about the gait of a girl, the works a girl should do, her behaviour towards her in-laws. A girl, therefore, is expected to follow the normative models that are pre-constructed by the society. The path in following all these models is full of hurdles as:

...daughterhood in India is not without its rewards, precisely because the conditions of womanhood are normally so forbidding. In contrast to the son's, a daughter's training at her mother's hand is normally leavened with a good deal of compassion, for which, as ever, there are traditional as well as psychological explanations (Ghadially 51-52).

Traditionally, the life of a girl is believed to change after marriage. She is expected to be obedient towards every elderly person in her husband's family. If she is found guilty in the eyes of her in-laws, then she may be blamed either as being inefficient or ugly or her mother is held responsible for her daughter's inefficiency. A popular superstition of this region is that there should be no marriage between the eldest son of one family and the eldest daughter of another family, which follows from the belief that the first children are found to be generally weak in intellect, as their mothers are themselves of tender age. Hence the above prohibition is popular among the people of the Assamese society. From this we also come to know that early marriage in case of women was earlier a common practice in Assamese society. This belief also reflects the concept of mothers as the main guides of children which reminds us of a popular Assamese proverbial expression *Ṭik baladhā olāi māti, Māk*

bhālei jiyek jāti, which contains the same meaning as stated above. It is believed that it is the woman, or rather the mother, who is solely responsible for ‘making’ her children’s characters. Therefore, the mother is always expected to teach her daughter how to become a perfect wife, daughter-in-law, and sister-in-law and finally, how she would attain motherhood (ibid, 63). The daughter-in-law is regarded as the reflection of her own mother and so whatever she does is considered to be the qualities of her mother.

It is said that the mother is the primary care-giver of her child. She is the nurturer as mothering is believed to be an inherent quality in every woman. Her love is said to be selfless. The mother is generally represented in a glorified manner in every literary genre. The idea of empowerment is always related to the concept of motherhood. The cult of the Mother Goddess also substantiates this kind of empowerment. The worshippers of *Śaktism* consider the goddess of *Śakti* as the supreme power and address her as *Mā* i.e., the mother. In Assam as well as in most of the parts of India the prevalence of *Śaktism* can be seen and mythical goddesses *Kālī*, *Durgā*, *Devī* are categorised as Mother Goddesses. Again the myth related to goddess *Kālī* is also popular in this region. She is worshipped as a mother goddess and is said to be one of the wives of Lord *Śiva* who is represented as a malevolent spirit. There is a myth that once she was sent to fight against a demon that was very dangerous. All the gods failed to defeat him and so they sought help of this goddess. Goddess *Kālī* defeated the demon easily and being happy, she started dancing a savage killing dance which caused the earth’s destruction. All the heavenly beings were afraid of her and decided to inform her husband, i.e., Lord *Śiva*. After getting the news, *Śiva* planned to lie down at her feet so that she stepped on him and stopped dancing. And indeed when the goddess realized the implication

of what she was doing, she stopped at once with a deep feeling of guilt (Ghadially 27). Thus, even a malevolent goddess is represented as a submissive woman while dealing with her husband. Goddess Kālī is worshipped as mother goddess but even this malevolent mother has no voice in front of her husband.

3.6. Widowhood and Social Practices

In the traditional Assamese society, a widow has to suffer a lot of hardships in her life. She is regarded as the inauspicious woman in the society. She is forced to be submissive and has to maintain many hard and fast rules to live in the society. Traditionally, a widow should not be well-dressed, she should not use a comb, brush or hair-oil. The inherent implication could be that if a widow uses such items, she might attract other male members of the society. But according to the traditional Assamese society, widow re-marriage is strictly prohibited. She is forced to wear only white dresses without any ornament. Moreover, there is a taboo among the Hindu 'upper' caste people that once a woman becomes a widow, she must be prohibited from eating all kinds of non-vegetarian foods as well as spicy foods using garlic and onion. But there is no such tradition regarding a widower. A man, after his wife's death, can marry another woman whenever he wishes to marry and can take any kind of food- whatever he likes. So constructed womanhood can be seen in the Assamese traditional society which can be well-represented in most of the folk literature of Assam, e.g. *Burhī holeu kowālī ānibā teu nānibā bāri* which means a man should marry only a girl even she is aged but should never marry a widow. Once a woman becomes a widow, her life is destined to be miserable. It happens as women, in society, are thought only for the sake of her

husband. Many rules are imposed on her and she cannot shed these patriarchal values.

It is believed that in a marriage the women whose husband is alive should take the initiatives in case of bathing the bride or the groom. “A widow is regarded by Hindus as an unfortunate creature. She is not allowed to take a leading part in any important ceremony” (Rajkhowa 80) as she does not come under the normative model of ‘ideal woman’.

3.7. Folktales and Women’s Representation

Folktales that fall in the category of oral narratives or prose narratives are primarily told for the purpose of entertaining, although they may have secondary purposes. They are believed to be fictitious and are cited as lies by story tellers and commentators, who mean that the tales are the creations of human fantasy. Folktales are set in any time and in any place and in this sense they are almost beyond time and space. But the tale whether composed of one or many episodes is always a well-proportioned whole. Folktales are primarily classified in two main broad divisions—simple tales and complex tales. When a tale is related to a single incident, then it is called a simple tale and when it is composed of a series of episodes, then it is called a complex tale. Again, the simple tales are divided into eight smaller divisions—such as the animal tale, jokes and anecdotes, numskull stories, the tales of lying, formula tales, cumulative tales, the catch tale and clock tales. Further, the complex tales are also classified into three groups—the Marchen or Magic tale, the Religious tale and the Romantic tale or Novella.

The study of folktales reveals the religious and political scenario of the contemporary societies and a great contribution to literature and

culture. The scholars find it difficult to ascertain the origin of folktales as the most common feature of every folklore item is that these were orally transmitted from generation to generation and ultimately compiled by several folklorists. Assamese folktales are also innumerable. Though they basically provide amusement and entertainment, they have an educative value in moral and religious aspects.

In most of the Assamese folktales, women are the central characters of the story or episodes. While studying the stories, it is found that the women characters reveal love and affection, revenge and retaliation, determination to achieve the goal, malice, injury and envy, beauty and graceness, mental strength and many other human characteristics and attitudes. *Burhī Āir Sādhu* is a collection of Assamese folktales compiled by Lakshminath Bezbaruah, in which women are the central characters in most of the tales. Some examples like 'Cilanir Jīyekar Sādhu', 'Champāvati', 'Tezimalā', 'Pāneśai'. These folktales depict events and incidents which are not only interesting but also touching. In spite of living in a fantasy world, the representation of these women figures are highlighted realistically in the different directions from which we can understand the traditional Assamese psyche regarding the construction of womanhood. Woman plays an important role in almost every Assamese folktale. Folktale always needs a specific environment where, generally, the grandmother tells the tales to her grandchildren. It is the grandmother but not the grandfather who has the principal role in case of storytelling to the grandchildren. It is perhaps for this reason, Lakshminath Bezbaruah entitled the compilation of folktales as *Burhī Āir Sādhu*, i.e. grandmother's tales. The term *Burhī Āi*, in Assamese, refers to the grandmother. However, if it is deeply

observed, it can be understood how the grandmother-figure is silent in all those folktales. Her importance is hardly seen in the folktales.

3.7.1. Woman at work

While talking about the representation of women's work, cooking and weaving have the most important places in it and folktales perform crucial role in depicting such works of women. In "Cilanir Jīyekar Sādhu" (The Tale of the Kite's Daughter) another tale collected by L. Bezbaruah, the kite's step daughter does not know how to cook and weave which create lots of problems in her life. As traditionally Assamese woman are expected to be adept in these arts, the kite's daughter feels extremely nervous as she lacks knowledge of such works and has to pretend to know everything in the presence of her husband's family. The Kite, her step-mother, helps her in cooking and weaving. But after coming to know about all these things, her mischievous co-wives made some plans to put the kite's daughter in danger. Almost every Assamese folktale depicts the step-mother as cruel, jealous and unkind and she, out of jealousy, can go to the extent of murdering her step-children. But surprisingly in the above mentioned tale it is the kite that helps her step-daughter till the end of her life. In spite of her representation as a step-mother, she is free from that stereotype. But, she is after all not a human being but a kite. Representing the step-mother in the form of a kite means that it is not possible for a normal human being to be free from the step-mother stereotype. Therefore, deviation from certain framework is represented as something unnatural and it has no realistic validity.

According to Vladimir Propp, the functions of any tale can be called the constants of that tale. The names of the characters, their attributes, characteristics have changed but the functions related to these characters remain the same and so a tale can be studied with the help of

those functions which are related to the *dramatis personae* (qtd. in Sharma 2003, 20). Assamese folktales can also be studied on the basis of this concept. The step-mother is depicted as the torturous woman who tries to find out faults in her step-children. The relationship between the step-mother and the step-daughter is represented to be more intense in cruelty than that of the step-mother and the step-son. Every Assamese folktale depicting the step-mother and step-daughter relationship has a certain process of storytelling. The first phase depicts step-mother torturing her step-daughter every now and then and that can also be, to the extent of death in the second phase, the father who may be a king or a rich businessman, has come to know about the misdeeds of his second wife towards his daughter and in the final phase, the step-mother has to surrender herself before her husband, the husband has taken a firm decision of punishing his wife for the sake of his loving daughter and thus, the story comes to an end. In the famous Assamese folktale, 'Tejimalā', the step-mother tortures Tejimalā, her step-daughter and finally kills her. Tejimalā's father was not present during this period. But after returning from business, he comes to know everything and decides to kill his wife because of her cruelty. After killing Tejimalā's step-mother, he recovers Tejimalā. The very same functions are there in other folktales in Assamese like "Tulā āru Tejā" (Tulā and Tejā).

Woman, in the role of co-wife, is also represented in a negative manner. Stereotypically she is represented as mischievous, devilish, witch-like, and jealous. Therefore, it is seen that folktales help in constructing stereotypes in a society. In the words of Ghadially, "In the popular mind there exists stereotypical expectations and beliefs regarding gender differences in behaviour and personality characteristics" (97).

There is not a single folktale found in Assamese which represent the role of a male figure as a step-father and widower. Rather he is always depicted as the husband of more than one wife and whenever he wishes to marry a girl, the earlier wife or wives have no right to prevent him from doing so.

3.7.2. Old woman

An important character found in almost every Assamese folktale is that of the old woman. She helps in developing the climax of the folktale. This old woman is represented as omniscient in nature. She generally belongs to a poor family and has no relationship with the protagonist or his/her family. But she appears in the tale in such a situation where the whole story takes a turn towards the climax. In “Pāneśai”, a popular Assamese folktale, representation of an old woman can be seen. The tale “Pāneśai” is all about a girl called Pāneśai who gets her birth from a duck’s egg in a house where a woman and her son inhabit. Whenever the mother goes out of the house, the girl enters the kitchen and takes fermented/cold rice and also prepares food for the owner. The owner is curious about the identity/motive of the offender. Once Pāneśai is caught red-handed. After her story gets uncovered, the old woman becomes sympathetic towards her. She gives her the name Pāneśai and declares her as her own daughter. The son, after meeting Pāneśai, falls in love with her and wants to marry her. He, after getting his mother’s consent, plans to marry Pāneśai without asking for her consent. Once another poor old woman asks for alms from Pāneśai and at that time she (the old lady) informs her everything about the design of the boy. Then only she is able to understand the whole plan. So it is the old woman who plays an important role in the tale. She behaves in such a way as if she knew everything. In the second phase of the same tale, there is

another old woman who is a non-relative of the protagonist and plays a crucial role in the climax.

In 'Campāvati', another popular Assamese folktale, it is again the old woman who plays the crucial role in the whole folktale. She informs Campāvati about her husband's past and present life and the whole story takes a different turn after the old woman's entry.

Thus, it can be said that the role of the woman is somehow related to the grandmother. As stated earlier, there is not a single line mentioned in folktale about the grandmother though there is always a strong bond between folktales and grandmothers. Lakshminath Bezbaruah's famous collection of folktales is named as *Burhī Āir Sādhu* (Grandmother's tale). It may be the reflection of that grandmother with that of the old lady but in fact it is not true as this old woman's figure is not always depicted as innocent and loving but also cruel, cunning, and practicing black magic. It is, therefore, difficult to reconcile these characteristics in a single character.

3.8. Conclusion

Every culture distinctly differentiates the sex roles between the males and the females and these differences are taught to them through a process of socialisation. Stereotypically males are assigned the works outside the house but women are assigned those inside it. Men are generally expected to be rough and bold and carrier-oriented; on the other hand, women are projected as emotional, weak and caring. Their main duties are child-rearing, home-making, and household activities. The nature-culture dichotomy plays a major role in constructing gender, for culture dominates nature as man dominates woman. The relationship between man vis-à-vis woman is the same as man vis-à-vis

nature. While man's 'rationalistic' and 'practical' outlook has allowed him to make use of nature as a raw material from which he can extract maximum profit, the same logic of rationality has allowed him to make use of woman; constructed as an irrational and emotional non-man by patriarchy. Patriarchal society has tried to establish a 'natural' parallel between woman and nature based on the ground that woman's body is subject to the same changes of cycles as we have in nature. This has allowed man to construct a male space of culture as against the female space of nature. Thus, reproduction has a close relation with nature. In India, the nature-culture dichotomy when it comes to women, does not work out the same way as it does in the west. Here she is not only related to nature but also to culture. Most of the time she is regarded as the culture-bearer of society, and the preserver of culture. For example, wearing a spot of vermilion by the Hindu woman on her forehead symbolises that she is owned by someone who has the right on her sexuality. People follow the rhythmic cycle of life as it is understood by the celebrations of various rites and practices based on the mythical beliefs that are mentioned earlier. Along with that co-relation between woman and nature, there is hence, a deep relation between woman and culture in the Indian context.

CHAPTER IV

A Brief Historical Overview of Proverb Scholarship

4.1. Proverb: an Important Genre of Folklore

A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation (Mieder 2004, 3).

It is difficult to define proverb in a specific way because of its pithiness. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (1989), a proverb is a “short well-known saying that states a general truth or gives advice...” (Cowie 1005). In the words of Archer Taylor:

The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking; and should we fortunately combine in a single definition all the essential elements and give each the proper emphasis, we should not even then have a touchstone. An incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not. Hence no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverb (qtd. in Mieder 2004, 3).

Proverbs are handed down from generation to generation orally and it is difficult to trace out their origin. A proverb consists of not more than two or three lines with different meanings in a certain context i.e., it carries meaning only in a particular context. According to Mieder:

Proverbs contain everyday experiences and common observations in succinct and formulaic language, making them easy to remember and ready to be used instantly as effective rhetoric in oral or written communication (Mieder 2004, xi).

The proverbs have no written text but gradually during the present time of documenting various folklore items, these are also collected and compiled by various folklorists. This process of collecting and

compiling proverbs is named as 'Paremiography'. On the other hand, the study of proverbs is called 'Paremiology'. Proverbs are the kinds of statement which is used for giving people some moral values, a type of warning or a piece of advice. Wolfgang Mieder, a professor of German and Folklore at the University of Vermont, is one of the notable paremiologists. He has been studying proverbs and their theoretical structures. He opines that proverbs have the most important roles in oral and written communications. Proverbs can be called the metaphorical signs which can be used in expressing one's feeling in a certain context. So there are different proverbs found in different languages which can be used in different situations. The most interesting thing is that proverbs are full of paradoxical expressions which are important to observe. Mieder opines that in comparison to other folk genres like folktales, riddles, legends, myths and jokes proverbs are the most concise but not at all the simplest form (Mieder 2008, 9). So it is important to go for research on proverbs from the scientific point of view.

4.1.1. Genre

Before going to the details of proverbs it is essential to look into a few points regarding genre. Folklorists, while studying folklore, have discussed a lot about what is genre and what its primary divisions are.

According to Vladimir Propp:

*Genre is a purely arbitrary concept and we need agreement on its meaning. Etymologically the word genre goes back to Latin *genus* and corresponds to German *Gattung*, but in fact it refers to a narrower concept, namely 'kind', 'sort', and corresponds to German Art. In Russian literary scholarship genre designates not a general but a specific concept (40).*

Propp again said that "In the broad sense of the word, a genre is a group of monuments united by a common poetic system" (ibid). While talking

about genre, it is important to understand the two main divisions of it— one is the analytical category of genre and the other is the ethnic genre. It is Dan Ben-Amos who discusses these two categories. In the words of Lauri Honko:

Dan Ben-Amos condemns analytical categories in no uncertain terms, being wholly in favour of ethnic genres. He says that the folklorists have abandoned cultural reality in their attempt to develop theoretical and analytical taxonomies of genres. This has meant, according to him, that genres have been transformed from cultural communication categories into scientific concepts (qtd. in Dundes 2006, 11).

The categorisation of proverb as an independent genre of folk literature can be called the analytical genre of folklore. On the other hand the term ‘proverb’ may have different ethnic genres which mean the same or is almost equivalent to the term ‘proverb’. As for example, we can take the various ethnic terms of proverbs which are popular in the Assamese language such as *prabād*, *prabacan*, *phakarā jojanā*, *dr̥ṣṭānta*, *paṭantar*, *bacan*. But it is not an easy task to define what the texts are which can be defined as proverbs and so there is always a controversy whether these terms carry the same meaning as the term proverb does. To try to make this point clear, Professor Mrinal Kanti Nath discusses these terms in a detailed manner. Though his article “Prabād, Prabād Sankalan Ebang Prabād Abhidhān” is written in Bengali, we can still take its help while defining the Assamese equivalent terminologies for proverb. As both Assamese and Bengalis are considered to be sister languages, they have a lot of similarities. Like the Assamese language there are almost same the terminologies for proverbs in Bengali. Some of the Bengali ethnic genres for proverbs and proverbial expressions are *prabād*, *prabacan*, *bacan*, *bāgdhārā* and *dr̥ṣṭāntabākya*. The first paremiographical collection in Bengali is *Dr̥ṣṭāntabākya संग্রহ*, collected and compiled by a missionary named William Morton in 1832. Professor Mrinal Kanti Nath, in his above-mentioned article, says that

the term which is given by Morton in the first Bengali proverb collection can be recognised as a suitable term for proverb. According to him the term *drisṭānta* is equivalent with the term proverb. He opines that the term *prabād* is also an equivalent ethnic genre for proverb in Bengali. So *prabād* or *drisṭāntabākya* refers to proverb which has a figurative sense or inner meaning. Therefore, while talking about proverbs, it is necessary to see whether they have any metaphorical sense or not. According to him, *prabacan* means saying, i.e., popular folk speech which are transmitted from generation to generation but has no proper meaning. *Bacan* also means saying but is slightly different from the former one. It refers to those texts which can be understood by their literal meaning like *Dākar bacan*, *khanār bacan* which are popular among the people of Assamese as well as Bengali societies. *Bāgdhārā* refers to the term idiom and *prabāk*, *prabādmulak bākyaṅśa*, *prabādkalpabākyaṅśa*, *bacan bhangi*, and *bacan* refer to proverbial phrases but not proverbs at all.

4.1.2. Text-Context Dichotomy in Proverbs

In case of paremiological research, it is important to look into the particular context. The context is very much essential for every folklore item including proverb. A proverb consists of a few texts which has meaning only in the presence of its context. In the words of Allan Dundes:

The collection of context is essential for all genres of folklore, but it is absolutely indispensable for proverbs and gestures. Yet the majority of proverb collections provide just texts. This is contextless folklore collection. Proverbs, as examples of a fixed-phrase genre of folklore, must be recorded in the original native language so that texture will also be preserved. But what about context? Context is just as important as texture and yet it is almost never recorded... (1980:30).

Therefore, to understand a proverb or a proverb text, one has to find out its context. Otherwise it becomes meaningless. While studying a

proverb, the Paremiologists facing many problems regarding its semantic aspects as it is used by the people in different contexts. The same proverb may carry different meanings in different contexts. For that matter, in the present time, the linguists and the folklorists are laying more stress not on the texts but on the context. They opine that the transliteration of a particular proverb from one language to another is more important than its literal meaning and one should try to preserve the proper context of that proverb.

4.2. Folklore Scholarship, in General, and in India, in Particular

Recent developments in Folklore scholarship have obviously influenced the study of proverbs and so it is important to have a look at such developments. While talking about folklore scholarship, it is important to observe the two schools of folklorists—the literary folklorists and the anthropological folklorists. The literary folklorists classify folklore into different genres like ballads, folktales, proverbs and riddles. On the other hand, anthropological folklorists consider folklore to be a part of culture. The American Folklore Society was founded in 1888 which can be called the turning point for the anthropological folklorists. They exercised a kind of control over the *Journal of American Folklore* mostly till the early 1940s. Of course, in 1940, the American Folklore Society was reorganised with numerous changes because of various circumstances. During this period, scholars like Elsie Clews Parsons, Franz Boas, and Ruth Benedict who had contributed a lot in the field of anthropological folklore, passed away. By this time, literary folklorists played a significant role in the American Folklore Scholarship and in the *Journal of American Folklore*. These folklorists made a remarkable contribution in the development of folklore scholarship. There are other perspectives of studying folklore like the pluralist movement in folklore,

development of folklife studies and of public sector folklore which also contributed in the study of folklore (Zumwalt).

Anthropology has four branches and cultural anthropology is one of these. This branch resembles folklore as it generally deals with the customs and traditions of a society. Anthropologists opine that folklore can help us in understanding the culture of one society. As it tries to study various cultures of the people, so it can be called 'the bridge between the literate and non-literate societies'. As in the words of William R. Bascom:

'Culture' is the basic concept in anthropology today. ...it consists essentially of any form of behaviour which is acquired through learning, and which is patterned in conformity with certain approved norms. Under it anthropologists include all the customs, traditions, institutions of a people, together with their products and techniques of production. A folktale or a proverb is thus clearly a part of culture (284).

As stated above, folklore has resemblance with anthropology because both of these fields study the culture of society. But according to the anthropologists, folklore is 'only one part of the culture but not the whole of culture'. Anthropologists are concerned about the place of folklore in society. Along with it, anthropologists also try to examine the relationship between folklore and the other aspects of culture. Most of the time folklore is used as an application for preaching moral values in society and so it helps in acquiring cultural practices of a society. Anthropologists are also concerned about the functions of folklore. Folklore, though used for entertaining people, is primarily aimed at imparting knowledge especially to the non-literate people. It can also help in understanding various rules and regulations of a society. It is a kind of legal document in the oral form for giving moral values to the people of the society. It helps people to escape psychologically from the tensions and frustrations of life. According to Dan Ben-Amos:

The concept of folklore emerged in Europe midway in the 19th century. Originally it connoted tradition, ancient myths, legends and fables and timeless tales and proverbs. As these narratives rarely stood the tests of common sense and experience, folklore also implied irrationality: beliefs in ghosts and demons, fairies and goblins, sprites and spirits; it referred to credence in omens, amulets and talisman (qtd. in Dundes 2006, 10).

During the 19th century, the concept of folklore was believed to be related to the rural people. These are the products of those people and thus, it was believed to be traditional and irrational in nature. It is very difficult to find out the origin of any folklore item as it is handed down orally from generation to generation. Therefore, it can be said that folklore is the creation not by an individual but by the collective effort of a communal group. So communality is another characteristic of folklore. Along with it, it has also the nature of universality as certain traits are universal irrespective of places and people. There may be different versions of the same folklore item but the basic theme always remains universal in nature. The term folk was earlier known as the *volk* a German equivalent for that. Both these terms emerged in the later part of the 18th and early 19th centuries. In the words of Ernest S. Dick:

With the first decade of the nineteenth century, we enter the period in which all previous endeavors to redefine national culture as a manifestation of a productive Volksgeist came together in an unprecedented synthesis. Tieck, the Brothers Schlegel, Gorres, Arnim, Brentano as well as the young Brothers Grimm set the tone of a movement that turned to the culture of the common people and began to collect the survivals of their past (qtd. in Dundes 2006, 69).

The very term 'folklore' was coined by William John Thoms in 1846 and from then only this concept of folklore came into being as an academic discipline. Before this period folklore referred only to the collection and compilation part but it was only after this century that folklorists have started to study it theoretically. Being a part of folklore, the paremiological study has also emerged after this century.

Scholars from India have made remarkable contribution in the field of folklore scholarship. The 19th century is very significant in case of folklore scholarship because of the impact of the colonial period; there has been a change in the approach of studying folklore. The role of the Missionaries is worth-mentioning in such fields. They collected different folklore items and then tried to classify them into different genres like folktales, legends, myths and proverbs. Along with the Missionaries, equal importance was given to the British Civil servants of that period in the collection and study of Indian folklore materials meant 'primarily to aid in the colonial administration'. Whatever the motivation may have been, like the missionaries, the civil servants too collected and studied folklore materials from all parts of the country including those untouched by the local missionaries. They succeeded remarkably in improving the quality of those studies where they involved the native scholars also in the task. This engagement taught the native scholars to learn the virtues of collecting and preserving their own folklore. S. Mahalinga Natesa Shastri's *Folklore in Southern India* (1884); William C. Crooke's *Introduction to the Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India* (1894) and *Natives of Northern India* (1907); George A Grierson's voluminous *The Linguistic Survey of India* (1903-1907) consisted of many oral narratives along with data on languages; John F.A. McNair and Thomas Lambert Bartlow jointly produced *Oral Traditions from Indus*(1908); E.M. Gordon's collection *Indian Folktales Being Side-Light on the Village Life in Bilaspur, central Provinces*(1908); Cecil Henry Bompa's *Folklore of the Santhal Parganas* (1909); James Todd's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1920) are some of the examples of the works of such scholars (Datta 2006, 1274).

British anthropologist, historian of religion and classical scholar, James George Frazer's best-known study *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* traced the evolution of human behaviour, ancient and primitive myth, magic, religion, ritual, and taboo. His contribution towards the field of Anthropology as well as Folklore is worth mentioning. After the age of Enlightenment, scholars have started to study everything with a scientific outlook. It was Frazer who instilled a scientific dimension and outlook in the study of folklore after which it was considered to be an individual discipline in the academics.

Jessie L. Weston, a folklorist contributed in the field of Folklore and Anthropology along with Frazer. Her book *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) has remarkable footprint in such fields. Weston's contribution in giving a new dimension in the fields of folklore is also noteworthy as both Frazer and Weston played an important role in questioning the Eurocentric biases in the academics. A new perspective of studying folklore was brought to light which paved the whole path of the history of folklore scholarship. Although Frazer has remarkable contributions in this field, he has been criticised by the later scholars as his works have been classified as armchair research which creates problems in methodological fieldwork. The later folklorists opine that to collect the actual and factual folklore data, one has to go to the field personally for collection so that the proper context can be collected and preserved. It is believed that the text without the context is meaningless with the loss of originality in the text. On this very ground they have criticised the works of Frazer and his followers by calling their research the fallout of "armchair" fieldwork. They believe that Frazer has done research on various folklore materials without going to the field personally and meeting the informants but simply by taking the help of various

compilations. Thus, according to them, this kind of work may lose the original context of a particular text of folklore.

Verier Elwin's works deserve a special note here as he played a remarkable note in the history of Indian ethnographical and folklore studies (Datta 2006, 1274). Other British people collected folklore from various regions of India but those data were supposed to be collected from secondary sources. But Elwin gave emphasis to the primary data collection, i.e., folklore collected from the field itself. He engaged himself in field work in various regions of India especially the North-East. He visited various north-eastern regions such as Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland for collecting first-hand data. His name occupies a place of significance not only because of field-based research but also because of his great contribution towards highlighting the lives of the unknown tribes of such regions. He is known as an important ethnographer and folklorist who contributed immensely to the history of Indian folklore scholarship.

As the native scholars were involved in the collection and compilation of books on folklore by the British, these scholars, as well as others in society, started to perceive a sense of nationalism amongst them. For that matter, folklore becomes an instrument of such nationalistic attitude. The very same folklore materials are then collected with a new and different outlook. The native scholars started to look at these materials from a nationalistic point of view. They felt that the nationalistic behaviour should be represented everywhere—in the language as well as in every folklore item of the country. Folklore, during such periods, was collected from the Indian point of view. It was also used as one of the important tools of politics. In fact, the great political leaders of the nation like Mahatma Gandhi emphasised on collecting and preserving folklore.

After the Missionaries and the British along with the nationalistic period, folklore became a recognised discipline just after India's Independence. Folklore during this period began to be studied scientifically. It was studied with proper scientific analysis and so it came to be recognized as an independent discipline in the academics. It was introduced in the educational institutes. Gradually it has come to be recognized as an independent and an interdisciplinary subject which can be called Folkloristic and students can go for higher studies like M.A., MPhil and PhD in Folklore.

During the late 20th century, a group of USA Folklore Scholars developed a new trend in folklore—the 'performance-centered approach to folklore which represents folklore as a process of communication. This performance-centered approach has also been reflected in the folklore scholarship in the Indian context. Richard Bauman was one of the supporters of this approach. According to him:

To conceive of genres not solely as classificatory categories for the organization of cultural objects but also as orienting frameworks for the organization of ways of producing and interpreting discourse signals a reorientation in our conception of folklore from item to practice, and indeed this new perspective on genre has been central to performance-centered approaches to folklore that began to emerge in this same period. Contemporary thinking about genre has continued to develop and extend this practice- and performance-centered perspective (57).

The 21st century is very significant for folklore scholarship in the whole of Asia. During this time, Asian cultural artifacts became very popular through out the world. Thus, any item of folklore has become the centre of attraction everywhere in Asia. With the establishment of the Ford Foundation in India during this century, the folklore of India has been able to attract people and get a grasp of the performance-centered approach. This act helped the Indian folklorists to communicate with the

folklorists from the USA. Gradually, India began to need more support from themselves economically as well as in other matters. Therefore, there was a self-conscious effort among the people of India to preserve their folklore items. For this reason there started a sense of belongingness and a conscious effort to assert themselves as Indians. Hence, folklorists in India started collecting folklore items and compiled them into book forms. There were different myths, legends and proverbs which were created for the sake of assertion of different ethnic groups. Of late, a new concept of folklore has emerged i.e., the public sphere folklore. The concept of public sphere was developed by the German social philosopher Jurgen Habermas (Miller 3). This concept can be applied to folklore performance. It tries to look at how folklore performs the role of a communicator and discusses public issues. It tries to develop a communication between the public and the society. There are three themes which emerged in the 21st century folklore scholarship in Asia, in general, and in India, in particular,—firstly, giving importance to field-studies so that the actual data comes out; secondly, using proper methods for analysing the field-based data with the help of various theoretical works and thirdly, generating the idea of folklore scholarship so that one can understand the application of folklore as well as folklore as an academic discipline (ibid).

Folklore studies in India have a special significance and therefore, the various educational institutes recognise it as an academic discipline. The reason may be that in India, folklore is categorised as one of the important aspects of culture. In case of north-east India, folklore scholarship can be put into practice in different ways in different centuries. During pre-Independence, folklore scholarship began to be initiated by Indologists. After them the Christian Missionaries took the initiative and finally the colonial administrators

strove for the advancement of folklore scholarship. But folklore as an academic discipline emerged only after Independence. During the late 20th century, folklore was used as a way to nationality formation among the people of India, in general, and north-east India, in particular. While talking about folklore scholarship in north-east India, it is said that there are three phases of such studies. In the words of Soumen Sen:

The post-Independence period has three distinct phases in the North-East: the phase of collection and documentation; that of an academic era of research and; the growth of the discipline of folklore with emphasis on teaching, application of folklore methodologies, and inter-disciplinary approach in research through extensive fieldwork (2).

4.2.1. Marxist theory on Folklore

The impact of Marxism can also be seen in the discipline of folklore. The Western Marxists try to find out a kind of relationship between Marxism and folklore. The western Marxists view folklore as a collective behaviour whose main aim is to oppose the dominant social order. According to the Marxist folklore theory, the folk refers not only to the rural 'peasant' but also the urban proletariat.

In such case, folklore can be observed with the help of Gramsci's hegemonic system. There is always a political function which is hidden in the folklore item which tries to depict the social inequalities. As in the words of Jose E. Limon,

We can identify the two distinctive Western Marxist positions on the question of culture and hegemony: Gramsci's educational radical politics and Frankfurt School's sense of the art as an ideological holding action. Both positions have been carried over into a second generation of theorists and both have clear implications for folklore (38).

In the words of Gramsci:

It seems to me that until now folklore has been studied (in fact, until now, there has only been the collection of raw material)

as a “picturesque” element. It ought to be studied as a “conception of the world” of particular social strata which are untouched by modern currents of thought (134).

He also said, “Folklore can be understood only as a reflection of the conditions of life of the people, although folklore frequently persists even after those conditions have been modified in bizarre combinations” (135). According to Gramsci, to know folklore is important as it gives a clear picture of the whole world.

The Frankfurt School is a type of Marxist-oriented research centre established in Frankfurt, Germany in 1923. T. W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Eric Fromm are some of the members of this school. “The Frankfurt School eventually became best known for their theories of ‘the totally administered society’, or ‘one-dimensional society’, which theorized the increasing power of capitalism over all aspects of social life and development of new forms of social control” (Kuper and Kuper 537).

4.2.2. Psychoanalytic Feminism & Folklore

The theory of Psychoanalysis can be called one of the most important approaches of studying folklore. Many scholars opine that this theory can be equated with the solar mythological theory. But some others oppose this argument. As folklore is said to be the representation of human society, so the theory of psychoanalysis can help in studying human minds in the society and folklore may be one of the important tools of it. According to the Freudian dream theory, whatever symbols occurred in the dreams of individuals, these are found in different folklore items like myths, legends, proverbs, folktales. It is believed that people express their desires, emotions or any feeling through the way to folklore. Freud tries to find out the unconscious mind with the help of folklore items. He basically talks about the concepts of Oedipus

complex and the theory of castration. In the later age the feminists argue that the psychoanalysis theory of Freud is not able to be free from the patriarchal norms of the society. Psychoanalytic feminism is a kind of writing which is used by the feminist scholars while analysing various principles. The first book on this area is Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* Freud, Reich, Laing and Women (1974) which tries to analyse the reason why stereotypical roles of masculinity and femininity are still prevalent in the society even if one wants to change. The Feminist movement especially in the 1960s and 70s have given emphasis to the study of Psychoanalytic theory. They think that this theory may be one of the reasons for women's oppressions. They argue that Freud's concept of penis envy and the theory of castration are not free from the construction of patriarchal norms of the society. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) also opine that this theory indirectly tries to make women inferior to men.

4.3. Anthropology, Folklore and Proverbs

Cultural Anthropology, one of the important branches of Anthropology, bears resemblance with folklore as it generally deals with customs and traditions of a society. Anthropologists opine that folklore can help us in understanding the culture of a society. As it tries to study various cultures of the people, so it can be called the bridge between the literate and non-literate societies. Proverbs can help in studying ethnographic details of a community which is an important aspect of Anthropology.

The impact of Malinowski and Boas on Folklore, in general, and Proverbs, in particular, is worth-mentioning. Bronislaw Malinowski is a British Anthropologist who is known as the father of the Functionalist

School of Anthropology. He contributed in the development of fieldwork in Anthropology. He developed the field of Anthropology from a primary evolutionary focus into sociological and psychological fields of enquiry. Naturally this approach revealed a wealth of subtle nuances about cultural values. But in addition it revealed a great deal about the psychology of the people under study. He introduced the concept of modern field work which really gave a new dimension in the field of Folklore. He contributed in the transition from armchair to fieldwork research in such fields.

Franz Boas was an immensely influential figure throughout the development of folklore as a discipline. It seems that Boas' concern towards Anthropology is more than that of Folklore as he opines that Folklore should be one of the parts of Anthropology but it does not mean that Boas had no respect for Folklore. According to him if Folklore became a separate discipline, its standard might be lowered. He views that if strict scientific methods are followed in case of this discipline and if field work is given more importance then the discipline may definitely shape up as a professional subject. Boas says that a particular theory can be shaped only with the help of thorough research and only then a particular discipline becomes standardized. It was Franz Boas who paved the way toward scientific methodology in Folklore. He was interested in collecting folklore materials from the field. He believed that the similarity of folktales amongst different folk groups is due to dissemination.

4.4. Interest in Proverbs

Proverb is a highly efficient tool for language documentation. It is much more than just a phrase in a language and it is a full member of a

language folklore family. It represents the uniqueness of the life style and living environment of language speakers and the uniqueness of their thought patterns or worldview. Proverbs are actively used by folklore scholars to gain insight into the most intricate cultural and societal aspects of the life of communities. Documenting proverbs is, therefore, much more than documenting the language—it is also about documenting the culture. Proverbs are also a unique language marker. A very "old" language artefact, proverbs have conserved a wealth of features, unique for the language—syntactical, lexical and morphological characteristics. There are linguists who take advantage of these properties and use proverbs among other evidences to base the historical perspective on the evolution of languages and their trends. While being amazingly rich in cultural context, proverbs are at the same time a very concise and compact medium.

4.5. Classification of Proverbs

It is not an easy task to classify proverbs into specific categories. But many Paremiologists have tried a lot to give a standard classification of proverbs on the basis of various criteria. Classification of proverbs on the basis of their structure was more popular during the 1970s. Such kind of classification was mainly done by two popular Paremiologists of that time—Gregory Permyakov and Matti Kuusi (Hasan-Rokem and Kats 112-113). Permyakov gives importance to three main aspects of the study of proverb—the logico- semiotic aspect, the linguistic aspect and the thematic aspect. Matti Kuusi also follows the structural analysis of proverbs and he tries to classify them on the basis of their meaning. Arvo Krikmann, an Estonian Paremiologist, plays a significant role in classifying the proverbs during the later period of time. He has used four different types of classification—logical structure, modal levels of

verbs, trope classification and syntactic structures. Hasan-Rokem is another Paremiologist who talks about proverb classification. Her classification is also based on the logico-semiotic and subject matter. She tries to analyse proverbs on four levels—the levels of text, context, structure and function (ibid). Hasan-Rokem's structural analysis of proverbs is the most important way of classifying these as, "Structure analysis is also important because it gives rise to a fascinating entity in paremiological research, a semantic group of proverbs that is defined as the group of the proverbs sharing the same structure" (ibid 114). Bartlett Jere Whiting in his book, *Early American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases* (1977) classified proverbs as popular proverbs and learned proverbs and the latter one is, according to him, called the sentences or sententious remarks (xx). In his words, "a popular proverb is one which has no known or presumed particular point of origin, and which circulated orally among the unlettered both before and after it was written down" (ibid). on the other hand, "a learned proverb (sententious remark, sentences) is usually distinguishable by its heavier diction and often by the fact that we, if not all of this users, are aware of its source in literature, either domestic or foreign" (xxi).

4.6. History of Proverb Scholarship

The present work has taken help from many sources to find out the history of proverb scholarship. Wolfgang Mieder's book *Proverb, A Handbook* (2004) and article "Proverbs Bring It to Light, Modern Paremiology in Retrospect and Prospect" (2006) are worth-mentioning regarding this. The article was published in the book *Folklore, Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* which is edited by Alan Dundes. The history of proverb scholarship can be traced back to the works of Aristotle, Renaissance scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam and

modern folklorists like Archer Taylor and Wolfgang Mieder who believed that there is a significant history of the two major branches of proverb scholarship- the collection of proverbs (Paremiography) and the study of proverbs (Paremiology). But scientific research on proverbs prefers both of these aspects to be included. The 16th and 17th centuries are considered to be the actual age of proverb. But the interest of collecting proverbs during the Renaissance begins with Erasmus. Desiderius Erasmus was a Dutch Renaissance humanist and a Catholic priest and theologian. He has been called ‘the crowning glory of the Christian humanist’. In his works, we can get various information regarding proverbs and its structure. He, in his *Adagia* (1520), talks about proverbs, proverbial expressions and Paremiology. The final edition of his book was published in 1536 which contains 4000 proverbs. He divides the book into various chapters on proverbs like its definition, utilities and importance. Robert Bland discusses Erasmus’ study on Dutch Proverbs. According to Robert Bland:

In the second part of his essay on proverbs Erasmus defends the validity of his work, insisting on the prestige and usefulness of adages. Proverbs, he argues, were highly esteemed by the ancients, who compiled collections and employed them frequently in their works (87).

Richard Chenevix Trench, an Anglican archbishop and poet talks about proverb in his *On the Lessons in Proverbs* (1853). Later on this book is edited by Wolfgang Mieder under the title, *Proverbs and Their Lessons* (2003). The author gives many examples of proverbs and proverbial expressions from various fields. The chapter two of this book is all about the generation of proverbs. It tries to find out the origin and history of using proverbs in the society. Trench says that Aristotle spoke of proverbs more than two thousand years ago. He also says that it is the proverb that can be called one of the most important literary properties of the civilized people. It looks at the Greek and Latin proverb tradition,

proverbs of the Bible and Medieval Latin proverbs. He tries to explain that new proverbs can be made on the basis of the present context. So proverbs are not only based on the traditional knowledge of the people but they can also be created in sync with the changing contexts (Trench 26-27).

While talking about the proverb scholarship in the international area, it is important to observe its changing nature along with the changing of time. Earlier, proverbs are considered to be the wisdom literature of society which can help the society in every field. If we talk about the age of the Bible, we can see that proverbs are the embodiment of the moral values of society. During that period of time, the Bible had an exclusive chapter entitled *Proverbs* and from this we can guess the importance of proverb studies. The approach towards the paremiological works changed during the 20th and 21st centuries. The book entitled *Proverb Lore: Being a Historical Study of the Similarities, Contrasts, Topics, Meaning and Other Facets of Proverbs, Truism and Pithy Sayings as Expressed by the People of Many Lands and Times* (1902) written by F. Edward Hulme has a significant role in Paremiological history. According to Wolfgang Mieder, this is one of the most outstanding books inclusively on proverbs during that period as it includes a holistic approach on the study of proverbs (2004, 125).

Wilfrid Bonser and T.A. Steven's edited book *Proverb Literature* (1930) is a significant work on proverbs. It is a bibliographic work on proverbs which primarily lay emphasis on European proverbs and includes 4000 proverbs in European languages. We can get an idea of the theoretical structure of proverbs from Archer Taylor's *The Proverb* (1931). The book consists of the study of proverbs and their structure and it tries to give a theoretical background of it. This book includes chapters on the origin of the proverbs, types of proverbs and

tradition of proverb scholarship. The book is later on reprinted under the title *The Proverb and An Index to "The Proverb"* (1962). In the beginning of the 20th century Taylor showed a new direction in the field of proverb scholarship and the latter Paremiologists can get much inspiration for studying proverbs in a systematic way. From this very time there is a paradigm shift in the field of proverb scholarship in which more emphasis has been given to Paremiology than paremiography. In other words, his *The Proverb* can be called the authoritative book on proverbs.

Along with Archer Taylor Proverb studies in the 20th century also owe a lot to the works of Matti Kuusi, Vilmos Voigt, Teodor Flonta and Wolfgang Mieder. International bibliographies on proverbs and the twenty five issues of the 'old' *Proverbium* chiefly edited by Archer Taylor and Matti Kuusi from 1965 to 1975 in Helsinki is a crucial work in the history of Paremiology (Mieder 1998, par. 6). This work has been edited by Vilmos Voigt under a different title *Proverbium Paratum* between the years 1980 to 1989 in Budapest (ibid). This journal includes various articles on proverbs from the authors of different areas. Unfortunately, the journal ran for only four issues. The 'new' *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* is edited by Wolfgang Mieder since 1984 in Burlington (ibid). It is a remarkable international journal of proverb scholarship. It publishes research papers and review articles on proverbs and proverbial expressions and includes scholars from all over the world. In other words, it has a pave-making contribution towards the history of proverb scholarship.

There are several collections on proverb scholarships in different languages like Greek, Latin, French, German, Danish, Spanish, Japanese, English. Morris Palmer Tilley's *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* in 1950 is an

important collection in the history of Paremiology. Matti Kuusi, an European paremiologist, played an important role in proverb scholarship. His *Ovambo Proverbs with African Parallels* (1970) can be called one of the significant role in the history of proverb scholarship as it gives a new dimension to the African proverb scholarship. It is a sort of comparative work on both African as well as Ovambo proverbs. Though according to the author the parallels from African proverbs are not sufficient yet it contributes the African proverb scholarship.

The book on proverbs by Grigorii L'vovich Permiakov has contributed to the history of proverb scholarship. Permiakov tried to make proverbs popular among the people of Moscow in 1970. He selected 1494 phraseological expressions and made it popular among the youths. These expressions include “proverbs, proverbial expressions, proverbial comparisons, wellerisms, fables, anecdotes, riddles, slogans, weather signs, superstitions, allusions to fairy tales, oaths etc.” (Mieder 2008, 18). He gave importance to these expressions because the native and foreign speakers of Russian need to know proverbs for a better communication in that language (ibid).

Shirley L. Arora's *Proverbial Comparisons and Related Expressions in Spanish* (1977) and Mark Glazer's *A Dictionary of Mexican American Proverbs* (1987) are based on field research in the Los Angeles area. There are bibliographies like Shirley L. Arora's “A Critical Bibliography of Mexican American Proverbs” (1982) and Katherine Luomala's “A Bibliographical Survey of Collections of Hawaiian Sayings” (1985) which contributed to the paremiological studies.

Arvo Krikmann, Ingrid Sarv and their colleagues have published a path-breaking work on Estonian proverbs. Both of them have worked

on proverbs, their history and their structural analysis. Krikmann emphasises the structural analysis of Estonian proverbs.

Matti Kuusi along with some other Paremiologists collected and compiled the book *Proverbia Septentrionalia: 900 Balto-Finnic Proverb Types with Russian, Baltic, German and Scandinavian Parallels* (1985). Gyula Paczolay's *A Comparative Dictionary of Hungarian, Estonian, German, English, Finnish and Latin Proverbs with an Appendix of Cheremis and Zyryan* (1986) contains about 680 Hungarian proverbs and their equivalents in the languages mentioned in the title (Mieder and Dundes ix). This book has an important role in the history of comparative study of proverbs.

The contributions of the missionaries and the anthropologists in collection of proverbs were tremendous. Such works are *Zulu Proverbs* (1963) by Cyril L. Sibusiso Nyembezi and *Swahili Proverbs* (1981) by Albert Scheven. There is also a remarkable history of the proverb scholarship of various languages of Asian countries. Proverb scholarship in such areas can be traced back to the early centuries. During the 20th century, there were some important works on proverbs and Young H. Yoo's *Wisdom of the Far East* (1972) is one of them.

Alan Dundes' contribution towards paremiological works is worth mentioning. He is one of the most important proverb scholars who studied proverbs from the performance studies perspective. According to his point of view, proverb is an instance of 'active verbal communication'. Dundes along with E. Ojo Arewa wrote an article on this issue of proverbs which entitled, "Proverbs and the Ethnography of Speaking Folklore" that was published in *American Anthropologist* (1964). Dundes' book *Folklore Matters* (1989) includes various aspects of Folklore and one of the chapters titled "On Whether Weather 'Proverbs' Are Proverbs" deals with weather related proverbs and he

examines whether these can be categorised as actual proverbs or these are mere superstition of society. Beginning with an introductory note on the bibliography on weather proverbs, Dundes finally remarked that weather proverbs are in fact not proverbs but simply popular superstitions. He discusses this matter by citing examples from this genre. "...Alan Dundes also had an incredible influence on Paremiology and paremiography. His publications are almost always informed at least in part by proverbial materials interpreted from a psychoanalytic point of view. It is this Freudian approach to proverb scholarship that makes Alan Dundes a truly unique paremiologist..." (Mieder 2008, 79).

Proverb in most of the time is considered to be the common sense of the people. "Common sense is not only a faculty but also a property of certain propositions" (Ledwig 123) which is believed to be unquestionable and when something is unquestionable then it is accepted by the society without willing to find the truth. Psychologically people do not want to ask question against what is called common sense. Modern scholars emphasise the study of proverbs from many new dimensions. The psychological point of view is one such example where proverbs are used as the tool for collecting information regarding the past history of the patients by the Psychiatrists. In the words of Wolfgang Mieder:

Psychologists and psychiatrists have long been interested in proverbs for testing intelligence, attitudes, aptitudes, and various mental illnesses. Numerous so-called "Proverbs-tests" have been devised for this purpose, the best known and most commonly used of which is the Gorham Proverbs Test. It was developed by Donald R. Gorham in 1956 as a tool for diagnosing schizophrenia, since schizophrenics have difficulty in understanding the metaphors of proverbs by interpreting them literally (qtd. in Dundes 2006, 95).

De Proverbio is an electronic journal edited by Teodor Flont since 1994 in Tasmania, Australia. It is considered to be the first e-journal on proverb scholarship in the world.

In the introductory remark of the book *Proverbs: A Commentary* (1999), Richard Clifford talks about the proverbs as wisdom text in this manner, “Heavenly wisdom comes to the human race mediated by earthly institutions or authorities such as the king, scribes and the literature the scribes write, and heads of families. In proverbs, the mediating institutions or authorities are the king, wisdom writings and the father...” (9).

If we talk about proverb studies during 20th century, it is very important to consider the works of Professor Wolfgang Mieder. The history of proverb scholarship is indebted to him and his works. He is a Professor of German in Vermont University, Vermont who has been working on Paremiology. He can be recognized as one of the leading Paremiologists of the present time. His books on proverbs deal with a number of modern aspects of proverbs. Most of his books are based on paremiology. His book *Proverbs, A Handbook* (2004) includes a holistic approach of proverb studies. Another contribution by him in this field is the *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*. Kevin J. Mckenna in the preface of his edited book, *The Proverbial ‘Pied Piper’ a Festschrift Volume of Essays in Honor of Wolfgang Mieder on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday* (2009) calls Mieder as the modern day ‘pied piper’ of Paremiology (xiii) because of his innumerable contribution in this field. He is the person who has given importance to the study of proverbs and their relevance in the current time.

Therefore, from the mid and late 20th century onward, proverbs were studied from different perspectives such as definitional, structural, semiotic, and psychological and this gave it a new dimension.

Moreover, Paremiologists tried to study the depiction of proverbs in art and modern mass media. One important example offering a modern perspective on proverb scholarship is the book *The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb* (1981) edited by Alan Dundes and Wolfgang Mieder. This book includes various essays on proverbs, its definition, function and meaning in social context. It also discusses proverbs as the representative medium. There are essays here dealing with the significance of proverbs in psychological testing and the use of proverbs by mass media. His *Wise Words: Essays on the Proverb* (1994) consists of essays that were published after 1970. Both these books contributed to the study of proverbs. These works examine proverbs from varied perspectives and the essays included here, concentrates on proverb and its inter-relationship with other disciplines. Mieder's *International Proverb Scholarship: An Annotated Bibliography* consisting of 3 volumes includes 4599 entries regarding proverb and its scholarship. According to Mieder, along with the overall proverb scholarship, it is also necessary to study the specialised proverbs and for that matter, his *African Proverb Scholarship: An Annotated Bibliography* (1994) is noteworthy. Wolfgang Mieder's *Proverbs Are Never Out of Season: Popular Wisdom in the Modern Age* (1993) is an another book on proverbs which primarily emphasise the methodological part of paremiological works.

There are Paremiologists who try to interpret ancient iconographic representations of proverbs. For instance, the book, *Proverb Iconography an International Bibliography* (1999) edited by Wolfgang Mieder and Janet Sobieski is a kind of bibliography of such books which are the mixture of both iconography and paremiology. Iconography in proverbs means a proverb is represented through the visual medium.

4.6.1. Proverb Scholarship in India, in general, and in Assam, in particular

In case of the history of proverb scholarship in India, in general, and in Assam, in particular, it is seen that the contributions of the Christian Missionaries cannot be ignored. Most of the earlier paremiographical works in regional Indian languages were written by them. In fact, this is true in the case of documentation of many genres of folklore. A cursory glance at the history of the proverb scholarship in India makes this very obvious.

It was William Morton who collected and compiled the Bengali paremiographical book *Driṣṭāntabākyasangrah* in 1832 which can be considered to be the first book on Bengali Proverbs. This is basically based on the works of Bengali paremiography. It was only after this book of paremiography that Bengali scholars came to the fore with works such as Sushil Kumar Dey's *Bānglā Prabād* (1985), Satyaranjan Sen's *Prabād Ratnākar* (1961), Ashotosh Bhattacharya's *Bānglār Loko Sāhitya*, vol.6 (1972), Barun Kumar Chakrabarty's *Bānglā Probāde Sthān-Kāl-Pātra* (1979). Most of these books are paremiographical in nature. Barun Kumar Chakrabarty's *Pragalpa* (1986) is a unique creation in the world of written as well as oral literatures as this book is a collection of stories related to proverbs. This kind of theme is rare in this area. Sudeshna Basak's *Bānglār Prabād* (2007) is a compilation of Bengali proverbs where she divides the proverbs on the basis of various themes.

In the case of Rajasthani proverb collections, Muralidhar Vyas, A.C. Nahata, N.D. Swami, K.L. Sehal, Govind Agarwal are some of the scholars who have collected and compiled books on proverbs, idioms, riddles, and sayings. J. Hinton Knowles's *Dictionary of Kashmiri Proverbs and Sayings Explained and Interpreted from the Rich and*

Interesting Folklore of the Valley (1885) consists of several Kashmiri proverbs arranged alphabetically with English translation and explanation. John Lazarus's *A Dictionary of Tamil Proverbs* (1894) is also a collection of a few Tamil proverbs with their English meaning as well as their explanations and interpretations.

The role of the Missionaries was crucial in the documentation of proverbs found in the Assamese language. It was P. R. T. Gordon who collected and compiled a book on Assamese proverbs titled *Assamese Proverbs* in 1896. This typical paremiographical book consisted of 300 proverbs and was reprinted in 1903. Scholars from Assam followed suit with collections of proverbs such as *Asamīyā Paṭantarmālā bā Jojanā* (1900) by Gopal Chandra Das, *Phakarā* (1927) by Kantiram Burhabhakat, *Paṭantarmālā* (1929) by Prasanna Chandra Baruah, *Phakarā Jojanā* (1941) by Sriram Chandra Das, *Asamīyā Prabacan* (1943) by Indranarayan Bara, *Rahrahi* (1948) by Dimbeswar Neog, *Dakar Bacan* (1961) by Dandiram Datta, *Assamese Proverbs* (1962) by Prafulla Chandra Borua, *Phakarā Jojanā* (1963) by Hemendranath Bhattacharya, *Dāke Bole Śūṇa Upāy* by Atul Chandra Baruah, *Asamīyā Prabād* (1972) by Sarbeswar Rajguru and *Phakarā Jojanā* (1973) by Dandiram Datta, *Rāijar Mukhar Māt* (1988) by Seyed Abdul Malik. All these books are primarily paremiographical in nature. They have collected proverbs and other sub-genres of proverbs from the region and compiled them in the book forms. Some of the books contain literal meanings of the proverbs but some others are mere collection of proverbs without any explanation. For instance, Prafulla Chandra Borua's *Assamese Proverbs* consists of 1193 proverbs classified into four groups, namely, rustic life with 162 numbers proverbs, religious life with 67 numbers, social life with 478 numbers and moral and philosophical lives with 486 numbers of proverbs. It is a meticulously

compiled book of Assamese proverbs with their literal English Translation, equivalent English Proverbs- whenever available, Sanskrit equivalent Proverbs-whenever available. Moreover, each and every Assamese proverb is mentioned in transliteration in Devanagari as well as Roman scripts. On the other hand, Said Abdul Malik's *Rājījar Mukhar Māt* is only a collection of proverbs and other sub-genres of proverbs without their contextual or literary meaning. He only categorises these proverbs under various sub-heads such as proverbs related to rice, fish, women, men, land etc. Harendranath Bhattacharya's *Phakarā Jojanā* is only a collection and compilation of some proverbial expressions without having their meanings. Sahityaratna Chandradhar Borooah's *Ratnakosh* has two parts—one dealing with phrases and idioms and the second one with proverbs and sub-genres of proverbs. The second part contains a number of proverbs along with their explanations in Assamese. Sarbeswar Rajguru's *Asamiyā Prabād* can be recognised as the largest volume of paremiography in Assamese which includes more than eight thousand proverbs, sayings and other sub-genres of proverbs along with their explanations in Assamese. He also mentioned the names of the informants from whom he has collected his data for this book.

Though in the present context many folklorists have started theoretical works on proverbs in general and Assamese proverbs in particular, the numbers of such studies are very few. Some examples of such works are Prafulladutta Goswami's article book, *Essays on the Folklore and Culture of North-Eastern India* (1982) and Chakreswar Das' *Prabad-Prabasan (Buranji, Baichitra Aru Bishleshan)* (2008). Mohini Goswami's PhD dissertation on the contextual study on Proverbs deals with proverbs and their contextual meaning in the Assamese society.

4.7. Gender and Proverb

The study of folklore, in general, and proverb lore, in particular, from the feminist perspective is a relatively recent trend in the academics. In the words of Thomas A. Green:

The study of gender in folklore has historical roots extending back as far as the 1920s. Mark Azadovskii's work revealing the influence of gender on tale-tellers' repertoire and performance choices (1926) and Margaret Mead's comparative study documenting extreme cultural variability in gender roles in tribal societies (1935) presaged issues still being considered today (406).

Folklore was never studied from the feminist point of view before the feminist movements and the recent introduction of the gender studies in the academics. Earlier folklorists tried to concentrate on folklore from the performance perspective which were male-oriented and they emphasised on the public spheres like pubs and street corners. They ignored folklore's private or domestic sphere which has recently come to be considered to be a more important area of research (Jordan and Kalcik ix). So in former times some genres of folklore like 'personal experience narratives, popular beliefs and jokes were less important or rather 'minor genres' or 'old wives tales' or 'just gossip'. As "...genres and performance contexts that are especially characteristic of men have most interested folklorists as worthy of study while folklore that flourishes within the private domain of women has been underrated and ignored" (ibid).

Before the emergence of feminist folkloristics, the fieldworkers were mostly males with very little understanding of the workings of the female mind. For that matter, during that time women were represented in folklore through the patriarchal lens and therefore, women's cultures were considered to be insignificant. But with the advent of many feminist folklorists, this notion has changed. Nobody's culture is today

considered to be insignificant and nothing can be ignored. Karen Baldwin, Margaret Yocom, Carol Mitchell, Linda Degh, Margaret Mills are the pioneering scholars in the field of women and folklore. Many new perspectives were offered by these feminist scholars.

The emergence of the feminist movement in the 1960s had a definite impact in the field of folklore. Feminists emphasised upon the importance of folklore as it helps to contextualize certain objects of society. It is true that originally folklorists were not aware of the study of folklore from the gender perspective but folklore was enriched by the inputs received from feminists. In the case of folklore, the feminist approach allowed a better understanding of the individual mind in particular and of the society as a whole. With the emergence of such an approach, folklore scholarship definitely got a new boost from the methodological point of view. Since it is believed that folklore genres are the representation of society, it is said that they can portray the individual's psyche in it. There are several other concepts which emerged along with the feminist movements that helped the feminist folklorists while observing women's position in society. In the words of Thomas A. Green, "The recognition of cross-cultural, cross-racial, cross-class also deflects feminist folkloristics from the attractions of essentialism counterbalancing the disposition to identify universal 'women's styles' or women's experiences"(Green 615). It was the feminist folklorists who brought a distinct change in the field of folklore. Earlier it was male-oriented and oblivious to the subjectivity of both the researcher as well as the informants. But the advent of feminism gave importance to the women researcher as well as informants as described here:

Traditional male folkloristics values genres and contexts dominated by men. Feminist folkloristics reclaims and recognizes women's lives and experiences, their creativity,

expressiveness and communicative acumen. It examines women-associated genres like quilting, or gossip, and women's appropriation of men's cultural forms by pulpit or dressing as men... (Code 211).

Traditional folklore represented women as the weaker section of society. It represented them as if they had no significant role and position in the family as well as in the society. But the feminist folklorists opine that such representation of women is only because of the power politics of patriarchy. It will be easier to understand this issue if we look at the various folklore items. For instance, in folktales and fairytales women are represented either as angels or as witches but not the real life experiences of common human beings.

If we look at the history of folklore scholarship as well as proverb scholarship then we get the idea that the concept of gender has been overlooked since long. Earlier people, in general, and folklorists, in particular, believed that for collecting folkloric data from the field one should not have faith in female informants. They generally prefer male informants for this purpose. In this context it is important to mention about the prevailing notions regarding the propriety of having female informants. Claire Farrer is known as one of the commentators who edited pioneering collections of essays on women and folklore. In the words of Farrer:

During the 1880's and 1890's women's expressive behavior was believed to be manifest in charms, quaint customs and beliefs, home remedies, and some retelling of folktales. In this latter instance, when a collector had a choice between a story as told by a man or as told by a woman the man's version was chosen (v).

From Farrer's lines it can be understood how gender roles are constructed even in the selection of field based data. It can be understood that during that period, while memory was used as one of the methods of data collection, the male informants were always preferred.

Therefore, gender bias was as much a historical fact in folklore as it was in the other field-based disciplines.

Interestingly, in the case of Assamese Paremiologists this notion was almost irrelevant as most of them mentioned in their compilations that most of their informants were women. If we take the example of Sarbeswar Rajguru's collection *Asamiya Praband*, we can comprehend this argument. He, in his book, mentioned the names of his informants along with the proverbs and those informants were mostly women. From this point it can be stated that it is quite impossible to make a general comment regarding gender roles in different regions. Moreover, such notions have undergone changes in the present day scenario.

Nowadays, for the feminist critics, folklore can be one of the most important genres for examining social constructs. Contemporary folklorists try to highlight the concept of gender and its representation in it. It is believed that the different expressive narratives have different opinions regarding the credibility of male and female informants. As for example, the same folktale that is told by a female informant is different from that of by a male informant. Patricia Fann Bouteneff in the essay "Persecution and Perfidy: Women's and Men's Worldviews in Pontic Greek Folktales" refers to James Taggart who studied Spanish folktales of courtship and marriage. In the words of Bouteneff:

He [James Taggart] psychoanalyzes this dialogue, and to that end assigns 'meanings' to the tales to show where they fit within the dialogue. He might have read the differences between the tales told by women and men in the pontos as a kind of conversation between the sexes, in which each side justifies its own position and shows how it is betrayed or falsely accused by the other (55).

Therefore, to understand the context of any folklore item one should take into account the perspectives of both women as well as men. Scholars like Azadovskii believe that taking into account the woman's

interpretation of a certain context may help in developing new ideas regarding the same. In “Feminist Voice: Strategies of Coding in Folklore and Literature”(1987), John N. Radner and Susan S Lanser show that women’s interpretation of certain events is different from that of men’s. They elaborately describe Susan Glaspell’s story ‘A Jury of Her Peers’ which depicts ‘two women read the kitchen of a third woman and come to a series of understanding’ (412).

Margaret Mills, a renowned folklorist contributed to the field of women and folklore. She is one of the leading figures in the popular culture of the Persian and Farsi-speaking world. She, in her article titled ‘Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore: A Twenty-Year Trajectory toward Theory’ (1993) which was published in the *Western Folklore* discussed the development of folklore in the light of the different feminist theories. She mentioned the special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* on feminism and folklore. According to her the feminist writers of those collections are ‘second-guessed in each case by the male general editors of the journal, perhaps claiming paternity or at least godfatherhood, of the ideas being delivered.’ According to her, Decaro’s bibliography on the feminist folkloristics published in 1983 was the first major cartographic effort regarding maps and territories (175). *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore* edited by Richard Bauman and Americo Paredes may be considered to be one of the pioneering works on feminism and folklore. In the words of Mills:

If we take *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore* as a starting point for the mapping of the feminist exploration/invasion of folklore studies, we will be starting at the pre-contact era. What is striking about that book for the feminist critique is its silence: (a) its strong articulation of the operation of difference in constructing human groups, over against (b) its total nonaddress of gender as a rather persistent and visible cultural resource in folk and popular models of difference(e.g. race/gender stereotyping)...(ibid 176).

The special issue on Folklore and Feminism that was published by the *Journal of American Folklore* (vol.100, no.398) was a great contribution in the field of folklore and gender. It is very easy to understand that folklore studies from the feminist perspectives can be seen just after the advent of the various feminist movements that started during the late 20th century and all these works are the results of such new ideas. It was in fact during the 1980s and 1990s that ‘studies of gender’ ‘opened new possibilities in the investigation of folk narrative’ (Bottigheimer 2).

The concept of gender has influenced the field of proverb scholarship since proverb is a part of the whole scenario of folklore. If we look at the history of proverb scholarship, we can understand that gender studies was not at all in vogue in the early history of proverb scholarship. It was just after the emergence of the feminist movements, that the entry of feminist thoughts into the field of proverb started.

Some of the feminist folklorists or feminist Paremiologists of the 20th and 21st centuries have studied proverbs from the perspective of gender studies. In collecting proverbs and proverbial expressions from the field, one needs to go to the field and interact with the informants and try to collect data from them. Regarding data collection, the researcher may collect data from both the male and female informants.

Mineke Schipper’s *Never Marry a Woman with Big Feet, Women in Proverbs from Around the World* (2003) is a worth-mentioning book on women and proverb. This book consists of many proverbs related to women which can be claimed to be the pioneering works in the field of gender and proverb or rather women and proverb. It is important to take help of the proverb, an important genre of folklore, as she said:

Oral literature plays an important role in confirming ‘traditional’ ideas. In particular, proverbs provide us with a rich collection of reflections on the female body and an

equally rich mosaic of the social consequences people's sexual differences have brought about. In this book, the starting point is that proverbs about women throw a fascinating light upon the worldwide existing gender division of roles in life (6).

With this, Schipper wanted to show that proverb can be one of the important ways to study the gender construction in the society.

There are other scholars who have emphasised the concept of gender, in general, and women, in particular, in the field of folklore as well as proverb. For example, Hiroko Storm in *Women in Japanese Proverbs* gave a statistical analysis of the construction of womanhood as represented in the Japanese proverbs.

In the Indian context also there are certain observations by the folklorists on women and proverb. For instance, Brenda E.F. Beck's article "Body Imagery in the Tamil Proverbs of South India" (1979) and Jayashree Bhattacharjee's book *Bangla Prabade Narimon* (1998) depict the way in which the construction of womanhood in the society are reflected in the proverbs. But all these works are not from the feminist perspective but are mere collections of proverbs related to women. If we look at the context of the Assamese proverbs or Paremiology, we can say that there are a few articles on gender and proverb or rather women and proverb in spite of its necessity in the field of research. As for example, Praphulladatta Goswami's *Essays on the folklore and culture of north-eastern India* (1982) includes one chapter entitled "Women in Assam's Folklore" where there are descriptions of certain folklore items related to women but the chapter is only a collection of these items but has no theoretical aspect.

CHAPTER V

Construction of Womanhood in Assamese Proverbs

While studying gender in representation we can take several examples from different representational genres. For that matter, folklore may be one of the best ways of communication and with its help, we can analyse women's portrayal in the Assamese society. Rosan A. Jordan and F. A. De Caro in their essay, "Women and the Study of Folklore" said that folklore scholarship from the women's perspective can be categorised into three areas- women in folklore, women by folklore and women as the performers of folklore. In their words:

The first of these areas relates to the broad issue of how women have been portrayed by the 'media' or, rather, in expressive cultural manifestations generally, though perhaps folkloric projections are the most fundamental of all. The second relates to questions of women's aesthetics: how women's social roles (for example, their traditional place in the private sphere of the home and their more tenuous position in the often male-dominated public performance sphere) influence female creativity, and how women's art projects a female vision of the world. The third involves how women have been recognised or not recognised as artists... (502).

Assamese society is known for its rich history of oral literature. The popularity of folklore in such region is worth-mentioning. Proverbs being the part of it are widely and commonly used by the people of this region. The various paremiographical works of this area are sufficient for establishing this notion.

Women are supposed to be categorised as the 'other', having a secondary position in society. Any gendered culture teaches people how to behave in the society depending upon the concept of masculinity and

femininity. All these trainings are acquired by the people through a process of socialisation from the very childhood and for that matter different socialisation institutions like the home, the educational institutes, the religious institutes, the legal, the political, and such other institutes play crucial roles. They teach every man and woman how to behave in society. So there are always certain stereotypical norms for every human being on the basis of its gender and he/she should follow these specified norms for getting the status of a “normal” member of society. On the other hand, people who do not follow those specified norms or people who deviate from those stereotypical norms may be recognised as abnormal or deviant. Patriarchal society imposes its expectations on human beings regarding their behaviour and attitude.

The patriarchal society has always the ideology that women should be positioned next to that of men and people in such society unknowingly acquire a kind of patriarchal ideology when women are supposed to be dominated by the hegemonic power group. Construction of womanhood in the society is an outgrowth of the dominant cultural beliefs and ideologies of the times. People’s belief in such constructs is strengthened by the need to identify oneself as a member of a particular linguistic or religious group. This can also be strengthened by the performance of certain rituals and activities which prevail in the structure of various cultural texts.

Folklore can be considered to be a part of the traditional knowledge system of a society. Proverb is one of the most important bearers of the moralities that are prevalent in a society. Thus, an analysis of proverbs can lead to a better understanding of the representation of gender in that society. This would also enable us to better comprehend the way in which images of ideal woman are generated, nourished and indoctrinated in society. Since proverbs are treated as the carriers of

conventional wisdom, it presents values that are spontaneously and unconsciously acquired by people. In fact, proverbs can lead to the generation of ideas that later become “commonsensical” knowledge in a society.

The present work tries to analyse the collected proverbs with a view to looking at the representation of women. This analysis would help us in situating the position of women in a society which is traditional and patriarchal. A critique of social positioning of women as evidenced in these proverbs would be attempted. The chapter would try to analyse why women, more often than men, are targeted either as objects of abuse or as ideals of goodness and morality in particular societies, especially after their marriage.

This chapter consists of an analysis of the representation of women in proverbs in the Assamese language. The researcher has adopted a three tier system of analysis where by firstly the surface meaning of the proverbs is provided. Secondly, the traditional understanding of these proverbs is mentioned and finally, the researcher tries to give a feminist analysis of these proverbs.

Proverbs in the Assamese language are replete with different stereotypical images of woman. Proverb being an important genre of folklore, can be called a representational medium of society. In the Assamese proverbs, women are represented either as weak, emotional, sacrificing, loving, caring or as cruel, jealous and selfish. To establish these characteristics, women are shown in relation to men, to other women and to the society at large. As stated earlier, this particular work concentrates only on those proverbs which are found in the Assamese language but not the other proverbs that are popular among the various ethnic groups of the region.

Along with looking at the texts of those women-related Assamese proverbs, the work tries to observe the proper contexts where those proverbs are used. Any figurative use of language can only have meaning in its context. Therefore, it is always important to contextualize any genre of folklore. Because of the nature of this dissertation, the researcher is more concerned with the deeper meaning of the proverbs than its literal ones. Furthermore, to examine the construction of womanhood in Assamese society as represented in the proverbs, it is essential to divide the chapter into various sub-sections. To this end, the chapter is divided into different sub-sections on the basis of thematic characteristics such as the female body, female beauty, girlhood, daughterhood, sisterhood and motherhood.

There is a notion that in the present time of science and technology, people hardly use folk expressions. Traditionally the researcher believed that proverbs are the orally transmitted items which are used only by the old people and not by the youth. But during the field visits for collecting data for the purpose of the present work, it is realized that proverbs continue to be used by the old and the young alike.

In the first visit to the field, the researcher could not collect a single proverb as the approach of data collection was not proper at that time. Whoever was asked questions like 'What is proverb' or 'Mention a few proverbs related to women', the informants did not utter a single voice. They expressed their ignorance about such issues. This was the case not only with the young generation but also in the case of the elderly people of the society. A few days later, the researcher changed the technique of data collection. The required data were then collected not in a formal but in a very informal way without the informants' awareness in occasions like a marriage ceremony or any other such

social functions while elderly people were talking or while the husband and wife were discussing a matter. Of course it is also true that some of the data were collected very formally from three women who took initiatives in the paremiographical works of both early and present Assam. They were Nalini Goswami and Mira Sharma from the district of Nagaon and Phulkumari Kalita from the district of Barpeta – two prominent districts of Assam. Apart from the formal conversations from which nothing very substantial emerged, the researcher had to create a friendly atmosphere among the people and start discussing topics which were distantly related to the particular work but which helped in extracting the required information regarding the usage of proverbial expressions related to women. As a matter of fact, proverbs continue to be in use in the society but in doing this, a vast number of speakers are unconscious of its use in real life situations. Of course, it is true that the old people use proverbial expressions more frequently than the young. Moreover, there are some proverbs which have become obsolete in contemporary times because of their irrelevance in the modern context. For example, one proverb found in Assamese language *Lorā dhān* *Qowālī patān* (boys are like the paddy; girls are the blighted corn) has been collected from the secondary sources but during the interview, most of the people have strong opposition towards it. Most informants mocked at this proverb and showed a deep sense of disagreement with it. Such disagreement could be seen not only among the young generation but also among the old people of the particular region. The researcher asked those people about this proverb to cross-check whether they have the knowledge regarding such proverbs that were found in the compiled books on proverbs. In many cases, informants said that though they knew about particular proverbs, they desisted from using it because of the sexist ideology from which such proverbs seem to develop. Thus,

there were many “bookish” proverbs collected from the secondary sources which were discarded by the informants in the field. For the purpose of cross-checking the validity of the proverbs documented in secondary sources, the researcher took the help of the questionnaire method based on which the researcher tried to find out the existence of the different proverbs among the people of the particular area in the present day context.

Proverbs are the representation of the society at large. It is a kind of medium through which women and men are represented and it can give us some idea about the molding of individuals in the patriarchal frame of a society. If we treat proverbs keeping aside their contextual aspects then they would have no meaning as the text of the proverbs are interrelated with the context where they are used. In many cases, the same proverb is used differently in different contexts for suggesting different meanings.

So, simply observing the literal meaning of the proverbs will not be justified. Proverbs are kinds of moral or educational texts for the non-literate societies. They depict various characteristics of both women and men and show how human beings should behave in the society according to their specific gender roles. All that is stereotypical is well-represented in the proverbs and that is why proverbs should be observed minutely to understand the social structure. Most of the time metaphor or other rhetorical elements used in proverbs are very important to be understood as such elements always have some hidden meanings in them. Sometimes the literal meaning of a proverb seems to have relation with women but in reality it may not have anything to do with women. Thus, the hidden meanings of a proverb may be totally different from the literal one. On the other hand, while sometimes a proverb may literally seem to refer to some other meaning but by contextualizing it

we can understand that its hidden meaning contain references to women and their nature. An Assamese proverb goes like this:

Lāo jimānei dāngar hauk

Sadāi pātar talei

(Literal meaning: The size of a gourd is immaterial; it will always be under the leaves.)

(Contextual meaning: Women of every stratum have to be dominated by men.)

This particular proverb is used to mean that women can never be at par with men. A woman may be highly educated or she might have achieved a lot of worldly success. But she will always be ranked after man in the hierarchical order of the social structure. This proverb consists of metaphorical words like ‘gourd’ and ‘gourd leaves’ which symbolise the womenfolk and the menfolk respectively. An examination of the literal meaning of this particular proverb will help to provide only a superficial meaning. To understand the actual meaning of the text, we have to take the help of the particular context related to this proverb. Therefore, text without context has no meaning especially in case of paremiological study because proverbs are always full of metaphors and such rhetorical elements can be understood only in the presence of context. This chapter tries to observe such social construction of womanhood in the light of different thematic heads.

5.1. Representation of the Female Body and the Concept of Female Beauty in Assamese Proverbs

...

when I was growing up, my sisters
with fair skin got praised

for their beauty, and in the dark

I fell further, crushed between high walls (Wong qtd. in Kesselman, McNair and Schniedewind 97).

Beauty may be a state of the mind but all through the ages every society has laid its priority on beauty as the chief criterion in the assessment of womanhood. Women in most societies adorn their bodies to look beautiful. There are certain stereotypical expectations of the female body in society. As Naomi Wolf points out:

'The beauty myth', has a powerful effect on all women. It consists of the belief that women must possess an immutable quality called 'beauty' in order to be successful and attractive to men. Our culture is permeated by the conviction that beauty is the central measure of women's worth (qtd. in Kesselman, McNair and Schniedewind 92).

But the standards of beauty differ from people to people, society to society. What is deemed beautiful by one society may not be considered so by another. The concept of beauty is also seen to vary from time to time. In the case of the Chinese society, long feet in females were not only figuratively pejorative; there were times in the past when the feet had been physically shortened for reasons of beautification. However, this tradition may not always be in vogue among the people of other societies. Every society has its own norms regarding the concept of beauty and if a woman does not fulfil those norms of the society she belongs to, she is not regarded as a perfect woman. Women who remain outside the prevailing norms of beauty are considered abnormal, evil, disobedient and cruel. Therefore, the notions regarding the female body are nothing but social constructs. People, after interacting with one another from one generation to another, acquire some concepts in their minds and behave accordingly. Gradually those concepts become naturalized into certain roles and with the passing of time those roles gain recognition from the society, which are, in fact, not real. It is common to represent any socially constructed concept in various literary

forms. Notions regarding the female body, as stated above, are a kind of social construct. In the Assamese society, a woman with puffed cheeks, for instance, is considered to be ugly. An example is here excerpted from the *Dakar Bacan* (Sayings of *Dak*), a sub-genre of proverb:

Nājāni daivar gati

Ophondā gālio hai pārvati

(Woman with puffed cheeks is generally considered unlucky but if fortune favours, she might turn out to be the lucky one.)

It is important to study how beauty is constructed in a particular society. The term ‘*ophandā*’ has a derogatory connotation in Assamese, e.g., *ophandi gangātop howā* (to be puffed up with vanity), *ophondā bhem* (great vanity). So a woman, having such cheeks, is considered to be arrogant, haughty or proud and is not liked by others. In spite of her ugliness she may attain success with the help of luck.

Almost every literary genre of a language is used as the medium of representation of the female body. Assamese literature is no exception. The female body is represented in both oral and written literatures in Assamese. *Burhī Āir Sādhu*, the famous collection of Assamese folktales, is one of the most important examples of such medium of representation of the female body like the tales of *Tejimalā*, *Ou- Kuwari* (The *Ou* Princess), *Āilanir Jiyekar Sādhu* (The Tale of the Kite’s Daughter). In the marriage songs of Assam, the stereotypical notions of female body are described. Moreover, some Assamese terminologies can be seen as the representative medium of the female body and its association with female beauty e.g., *Kaṅkāl khāmusia ōwālī* (girl with slim waist), *Māgur baraniā ōwālī* (girl with the colour of *Māgur* fish), *Bhomorā kaliā ōuli* (hair as black as the bumble-bees) *Dālim guṭiā Dānt* (teeth like the seed of the pomegranate).

Representation of the female body is an important area of research for the feminist scholars. Human biology is an important key to understand human behaviour as proverbs referring to the female body illustrate. The female body is the subject of numerous assumptions and projections in oral traditions regarding what is good, bad, desirable, repugnant from hair to toes; the female body and female beauty are commented upon. Representation of the female body is one of the most common features of Assamese proverbs. Ideological conception regarding the construction of female bodies can be seen in many Assamese proverbs. The present study discusses a few proverbs in Assamese where the female body is represented. Such stereotypical representations of the female body can be mentioned in the following discussion.

Oṅthar opare gophar śāri

Nitchai sito bidhavā nāri

Variation,

Oṅthar opare gopher śāri

Sei tiri dekhante bāri.

(A woman who sports a moustache will definitely attain widowhood.)

The moustached woman is doubly cursed because like all women she is categorised as the ‘other’ but along with it she is also considered to be an ‘error’. Being a deviation from the normative model of female structure, she is flawed. She is neither a “normal” male nor female. The moustache of a woman upsets the clean binary division between men and women. Just as effeminacy in man is highly undesirable, any sign of masculinity is even more unwelcome. One can see the focus on the importance for a woman to look good and any woman who looks like a man or vice-versa is an anomaly.

Consider, for instance, another proverb which goes like this:

Jār gharat matāmuwā tiri

Tār gharat nāi ĩri.

(Houses consisting of women having masculine appearance have no prosperity.)

Women lacking such stereotypical features are alienated from the society. Though the transformation from female to feminine is constructed, yet it is considered to be a natural process and for that very reason people accept these feminine qualities of a woman as 'real'.

While talking about representation or rather social representation we should be very much clear about the term. Social representations are the social constructs which are ideologically structured in the society. Every social being acquires such constructs not in a conscious way but it can be possible with the help of the day-to-day practices. People become so much well-involved in all those representational activities that those activities seem to be natural but not constructed. Such institutes can help in constructing the ideological mind set of the people in the society irrespective of their gender. Gradually they adopt all those social constructs through that process of socialisation. Any study that denotes representation has relation with the concept of value system that prevails among the people of one society e.g.,

Kutkurā ĩli khajatir guri.

(Women having curly hair are supposed to be quarrelsome by nature.)

A woman possessing curly hair is not quarrelsome but it is the value-judgment that people use in creating any ideological concept. Such woman is represented as quarrelsome through the medium of proverb. The concept of representation can be seen in every aspect of

society and its culture. The representation of the curly hair in case of the females can help us in understanding the stereotypical model of the patriarchal society that women should maintain their hair in a very systematic manner. It may refer to other aspects of the social structure. It is known to all that the domestic duties including cooking are supposed to be done by women. While preparing food it is the duty of the cook to be conscious of cleanliness and hygiene. Earlier, among the Assamese people, women maintained long hair. Since they had long hair, they had to maintain themselves in a disciplined way so that the food was not spoilt. Wastage of food in this way creates a host of other problems. This proverb provides us with a clue to our understanding of many issues related to women. Firstly, the interior of the house is always meant for women; secondly, quarrelsome women are discarded from the society; thirdly, women having curly hair are not desirable.

In any form of literature, one object is acted or substituted for by another object which is real and there is a difference between the real one and the represented one. Thus, there is always a relationship between the thing which is represented and the person before whom it is represented and here the concept of ideology plays an important role. The ideological concept regarding a particular object is more important than the innate quality that the object carries and it is important to understand that ideological concept because according to Ferdinand de Saussure, there is no intrinsic relationship between the signifier and the signified; it is only based on arbitrariness (Hartley 1995, 16). It is the concept of ideology of a person that makes it meaningful. In other words, ideology can be called the bridge between the object or person that is represented and the person for whom that representation is constructed, e.g.,

Topanir neosān rātipuā

Tirir neosān sarumuwā.

(It is good to get rid of sleeping in the morning as it is not good for health; likewise, a woman with a small face should be discarded as she is considered to be quarrelsome.)

In Assamese society people may have an ideology about women's appearance. Being governed by such ideology, there is a prevailing notion that women's appearance should be distinct. If someone deviates from those norms, she will be categorised as a non-woman in day-to-day practices as well as in literature where they are found in the represented form.

The object of representation is always incomplete without the context. The object or person which is represented for another object or person can be understood only in the presence of a certain context. In semiotics, any object or person can be called a sign which has meaning in the presence of a particular context, for example:

ᱚᱱᱟᱠᱟᱨ ᱠᱟᱢᱟᱝ ᱠᱟᱢᱟᱝ ᱠᱟᱢᱟᱝ ᱠᱟᱢᱟᱝ

Two interpretations regarding this saying were encountered during the field work and the difference particularly centered around one word, 'nagini'. It connotes two meanings- firstly, a female snake and secondly, a Naga woman, member of an ethnic community of Assam as well as of North-East India. The first meaning goes like this- girls having snake-like eyes and a smiling face are not suitable for marriage. To appreciate this one must have some knowledge about what the 'snake' stands for as a symbol. In Assamese society, the snake is often represented as a silent killer, revengeful and many proverbs have references to such qualities of this reptile. For example:

Sāp māri negurat biṣ thowā

(Contextual meaning: Vanquish a foe after having brought him under control).

Here the snake is used to symbolise a foe.

Sāpe kaṅkālar kob nāpāhare

(Contextual meaning: The defeated will always harbour feelings of revenge towards his malefactor).

A proper understanding of a proverb therefore, demands knowledge of the motifs and symbols regularly used in literature. It is not possible to separate a representational sign from the context because that sign can only be understood in the presence of other signs that are related to it. The whole process of representation is a system which may be called the 'codes' as in the words of W.J.T. Mitchel:

...codes refer to a body of rules for combining and deciphering representation signs. When something stands for something to somebody, it does so by virtue of a kind of social agreement- 'let us agree that this will stand for that'- which once understood, need not be restated on every occasion (24).

The second interpretation of the saying *ṛowālī nānibā nāgini cakuwā mukhat miṣikiā hāṅhi* is that girls having eyes like the Naga women and a smiling face should be discarded. During the field visit for this present study, it was found that earlier in Assamese society it was believed that the people of the Naga community, especially the women, should not be taken into faith. They were believed to be cheats who exploited people with their beauty and so this proverb is a kind of warning against the people of such society. From this proverb we can understand how ethnicity is constructed and represented in the society and to understand this, one has to take the help of several literary texts whether oral or written.

Language not only refers to the voiced forms, it refers to any kind of communication where the eyes play an important role too. The eyes are considered to be one of the main expressive media of communication. With the help of eyes we can acquire knowledge regarding the whole world. Along with the physical world that we live in, the people that we meet can be inserted into our body and mind through the eyes. It is the eye which has an impact on our mind. The eyes can be called the way through which we can study the mind or the heart of a person. An Assamese proverb describing women's eyes goes like this:

Nowāli nānibā bijuli sakuwā mukhat misikiā hāñhi.

Or,

Nowāli leterā bijuli sakuwā māre misikiā hāñhi.

(Meaning: Girls, having eyes like lightning, should be shunned or regarded as foul beings.)

Proverbs of similar types in other languages can also be cited here:

Romanian proverb- *A house without curtains is like a woman without eyebrows.*

Beautiful eyes, villainous heart. (Creole, Guadeloupe) (Schipper, 29).

For an understanding of the concept of ideology, we can cite an example here from the *Dakar Bacan* (Sayings of the *Dak*), a sub-genre of proverb:

Kuṭkurā guli meli phurai

Dāke bule tāi giri nāsai.

(Meaning: A woman having curly hair is considered to be the destroyer of the family.)

The relation between woman with curly hair and destroyer of a family is nothing but arbitrary. It is the ideological set-up which bridges these two things. So ideology is a set of some fixed rules which cannot be disobeyed and people accept the ideas that have been carried by the ruling class as the ideas given by the whole society. The most important thing is that this set of ideas is accepted as the natural process of the society by each of its members. Women accept these ideas as natural. The concept of Ideology helps in naturalising the state of things in society and the people's psyche is ready to accept what is prevalent in the society. Women become the object of commodity as well as they are judged within the framework of the male gaze. For instance,

Āhu ꣳābā gadhuli, Śāli ꣳābā puwā,

Khoj kār hote sowāli ꣳābā, kon kenekowā.

(Meaning: The *Āhu* rice is pleasant to be seen in the evening, the *Śāli* rice is pleasant in the morning; a girl should be judged by her gait.)

Male gaze seems to objectify women as 'good' or 'bad' according to their own choice for which women feel a kind of alienation from what they really are.

Most of the time, it is believed that women get beautifully dressed only because of their lovers or husbands. As in an Assamese historical ballad 'Barphukanar Git', when the Barphukan or Viceroy of Guwahati has to flee suddenly in order to escape the wrath of the Prime Minister of the land, his wife expresses her sorrow vividly. In the words of Praphulladatta Goswami:

I no longer put on my bangles...

I shall pull off my gold necklace... (1982:21).

Therefore, women are supposed to be projected through the male gaze and become the object of commodity. According to Patricia Uberoi, "Women have become objects or things to be appropriated, possessed

and exchanged in the social relations of cooperation and competition among men” (WS41).

In any communicative genre, women are portrayed as the objects or commodities and represented as the objects of male desire. They become the sex symbols of the society. From the earlier times the devaluation of women as sex objects and commodities has been done with the help of various representative genres. By commodifying women, such communicative genres limit the role and position of women in society. For instance:

keṣā baṅā rihāre balāba pāro mai, kutkurā ʼuli dekhi bhāge.

(Meaning: If a woman has curly hair, she will be rejected by society in spite of her abilities in other household chores.)

By abusing woman society wants to show that if she lacks the normative criteria or if there is any deviation from the particular normative criteria, she should be regarded as disobedient. Her beauty depends on the male gaze, i.e., how the male members of the society wish to see her. The desires of the male members to observe the female members, initiate all kinds of representation and construction of womanhood in a society. in the words of Leela Dube:

Considerable importance is attached to the way a girl carries herself, the way she sits, stands and talks and interacts with others. A girl should walk with soft steps: so soft that they are barely audible to others. Taking long strides denotes masculinity...A girl has to be careful about her postures...To establish her feminine identity; a young girl should avoid masculine demeanour and behaviour (WS16).

An Assamese proverb can be cited in this context:

Akājī tiroṭār tinitā gun, khojar terā-bekā, mātar henāhucā, bhātar domādom.

(Meaning: An unskilled woman has three features—winding gait, indistinct speech and a ravenous appetite.)

5.2. The Co-Wife and Step-Mother Motifs in Assamese Proverbs

As stated earlier, different pieces of folk literature permit us to undertake a comparative study of sex roles as well as the place of women in the society in the recent years. Male-dominated symbolic forms have been variously analysed to study woman's position in the society. By examining women-related proverbs, one can understand how women are perceived in the culture of a particular society. This portion of the chapter discusses the images of women reflected in the proverbs found in Assamese language with the help of two very commonly used and specific motifs- 'co-wife' and 'step-mother' used in these proverbs. It is interesting to note that women are more often than not at the receiving end of such verbal behaviour, as they are held up as either ideal to be emulated or targeted as objects of abuse. However, in Assamese proverbs the latter is more common than the former. Moreover, such proverbs depict female jealousy and hatred.

The co-wife and step-mother in Assamese proverbs are generally shown in very poor light. While collecting data from the field or from the secondary sources, the researcher could not come across a single proverb related to these specific roles which bear positive depictions of women in these two roles. They are depicted as being cruel beyond redemption e.g., there are proverbs in Assamese regarding co-wife like

Satinir pok diu bolotei bastu bāhi hai jowā.

(If you think of giving it to the co-wife's son, the food cannot but go stale).

Nijar nāk kāti satinir jātrā bhanga

(Cut one's own nose to prevent the co-wife from traveling).

Co-wife is the matter of hatred for the other co-wife and she can go to any extent for creating problems to her co-wife. In other words, a woman having co-wife, is very much jealous of her. The second proverb (*Nijar nak kati satinir jatra bhanga*) shows that to create problem for one's co-wife, one can even hurt herself or by harming oneself, she can try to make her co-wife in danger, e.g., *Satinir jalat gu patat diyau khai* carries the same meaning.

*Samān satinir kolāt po,
Ghumati nāhe cakut lo.*

(If the son is in the co-wife's lap, he cannot sleep but has to cry.)

*Satinir po,
Gā nopore jur.*

(It is the co-wife's son and that is why I will be satisfied only by torturing him.)

Ejoni thākile (thākante) ejoni ānile khariāl śunibo lāge.

(If one gets another woman in spite of the existence of his first wife then he has to face quarrels between the co-wives.)

Another common motif is that of the step-mother. Usually, in most items of folk literature, the step-mother motif is used quite frequently. The stock image of a step-mother is of one who favours her biological offspring and is very cruel towards her step-children. Usually in most of the items of folk literature the step-mother motif is used in such events when children have lost their own mother. The step-mother motif is also represented in a gloomy picture like that of the co-wife. They are supposed to be very cruel to their step-children. Many folk tales like 'Tejimōlā' borrow this motif. 'Tejimōlā' is a popular folktale in Assam and it first anthologised by Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbaruah. This kind of motif can also be found in other parts of the

country and across the world. Assamese proverbs too have made use of this motif, e.g.,

Dhānkherar juye māhī āir marame samān

(There is equality between the simmering husk and the step-mother's affection)

Māhī āir marame (ādare) kherar juye samān.

(There are similarities between the step-mother's love and the burning straw)

Ātāitkai titā nemu tengār pāt

Tātokoi titā māhī āir māt.

(The bitterest taste is in the lemon leaves but the words of the step-mothers are far more than that).

Variation,

Ātāitkai titā nim gacar pāt

Tātokoi titā māhī āir māt.

(The bitterest taste is in the Neem leaves but the words of the step-mothers are far more than that).

There are references to the practice of polygamy in Assamese proverbs. However, widows do not find a place in the scheme of multiple marriages. This concept points to the fact that the idea of a woman marrying more than once was a taboo e.g.,

Su bāṭ dur gaman tāk nidibā eri,

Burhī haleu jiyari ānibā,

Teu nānibā bāri.

(Do not miss out on the chance to travel the good long way. Likewise, it is better to get married to an aged girl than to a widow.)

The proverbs at one level can be an internalization of overt patriarchal structures; at another they are subversive in the sense that they hold out a warning for the woman who is ready to accept a married man or a man who strays from monogamy. Polygamy may be out, but adultery still continues. Thus, both these roles are portrayed in proverbs as being cruel to their family members and in a sense their cruelty stems from a feeling of deep insecurity.

5.3. Women in Terms of Kinship, a Comparison between Consanguinal and Affinal Relationships

It is interesting to observe how women are represented in the proverbs throwing light on the different kinship relationships prevalent in the Assamese society. It is also interesting to come up with a comparative note on the two aspects of such kinship terms. In the words of S.C. Dube, “Kinship denotes the recognition of relatives either through a blood relationship (technically called “consanguinity”) or through marriage (in the language of anthropology and sociology called “affinity”)” (80).

This portion of the chapter intends to study the construction of womanhood as represented in the proverbs in Assamese with the help of various kinship relationships. It also tries to compare the different roles of woman within the paradigm of those terms of kinship. It is quite interesting to mark that women, playing the role of consanguine relationships generally get more advantageous position than those of affine, e.g., women in the roles of mothers and daughters are, to some extent, given much more respect in comparison to the women as mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, sisters-in-law and so on and so forth. We can visibly realise such distinctions as represented in the Assamese

proverbs as well as sayings. Since the role of women as mothers is considered to be the best period of every woman, the present discussion begins with that role.

5.3.1. Proverbs associated with Mother and Mother-in-Law

It is quite obvious that the role of mother is a kinship term which belongs to the consanguine relationship, i.e. it is a relationship of blood. It is seen that women in the role of the mother enjoy a more prestigious position in society than any other roles that they play. Such ideology of glorifying mothers is well-represented in the proverbs in Assamese language. Mothers are considered to be the makers of the society as they are the creators of the future generation. While talking about the construction of womanhood, two concepts come to our mind – fertility and reproduction. Both these concepts are directly related to the concept of motherhood. Therefore, it cannot be compared with any other roles played by women. It is believed that the period of attaining motherhood is the best period of every woman's life and every woman is expected to perform such a role. Almost all the time she is held in high esteem by the members of the family, e.g.,

Āir samān haba kon?

Nair samān baba kon?

Here a mother is compared with the river. It is a universal truth that river is eternal, its flow never stops. Likewise, a mother is beyond comparison, her love and affection never dry. This proverb obviously glorifies the mother.

It goes without saying that the mother always thinks of her children's well-being. A proverb records this concept as follows:

Māke cāi mukhalai,

Ghainie cāi hātalai.

Mothers are known to be caring and sympathetic towards their children. They have only good will for them. The children vice-versa have a kind of emotional bondage with their mothers. They in their childhood get trouble without their mothers' helping hands. Such bondage is clearly reflected in many proverbial expressions. Mother's concern is always towards the welfare of her children but it is said that the wife's concern is towards her husband's property. Thus mother is depicted as incomparable character in her approaches.

Again another proverb regarding mother goes like this:

Dhui pakhāli kolāt lai,

Teo bole tāi.

Māri dhari bātāt thai,

Teo bole āi

This proverb speaks about the deep love that a mother has for her children. Children feel naturally drawn towards their mother and no one act as a substitute for her.

In proverbs, sayings or such other expressive genres a mother is always compared with God. Sometimes, it is said that to worship one's own mother is equal to worshipping God. The mythical story of goddess Pārvatī and her son Lord Ganesha can prove that giving regard to one's mother is equivalent to worshipping God. The very same concept is also reflected in the proverbial expression-*Mākar bharir talat swarga*. It means heaven is at mother's feet. This proverb is a glaring example of metaphoric expression. By this proverb, one can understand that mother is placed in the highest position in the world.

In contrast to the portrait of mother, the mother-in-law is generally represented as a negative character. We commonly see that there is a mixed feeling towards the role of the mother-in-law as

represented in the proverbs and sayings. There are some proverbs which depict mother-in-law in a positive light, e.g.,

Khābi āhur, khābi śāhur,
Khābi ātār, khābi katar.

It is said that there are some sweet or pleasant things in the world. Things offered by mother-in-law are among them. It shows the affection that a mother-in-law has for her son-in-law and daughter-in-law and in this way her role is glorified. Again another proverb goes like this:

Māce garakā ānjā khābā,
Śāhue garakā bowāri bābā.

It means that the daughter-in-law trained by a mother-in-law is like a fish curry cooked with vegetables. Mother-in-law, here, is given much importance.

But as we have already said that there is a varied feeling towards the mother-in-law which is reflected in Assamese proverbs. There are some proverbs which treat a mother-in-law as a bad-mannered and cruel person.

Kacu hale khajuwāi,
Śāhu hale nacuwāi.

People are allergic to *kacu*, the arum plant, which causes an itching sensation. Likewise, a mother-in-law makes her daughter-in-law dance to the tune of her music. Here the mother-in-law is depicted as a dangerous lady.

Though we do find instances of similar references being made to the father-in-law, these are far rarer. In general, there are a host of references to the dubious role played by the mother-in-law who is always seeking excuses to torture her daughter-in-law:

*Kinu kam śāhu āir gun,
Ehāte khārani, ehāte lon.*

This proverb literally means that the mother-in-law is always more than eager to torture her daughter-in-law at the slightest pretext. Thus, the stereotypical image of the mother-in-law is that of a dangerous and sadistic woman who never misses out on any opportunity to humiliate and punish her daughter-in-law.

5.3.2. Proverbs associated with Daughter and Daughter-in-Law

A daughter is depicted as affectionate and pretty and she seems to be the cause of happiness in an Assamese family. It is said that to arrange the daughter's marriage and to assign her responsibility to another person (the groom) is a sacred act. Here is an example:

*Grihe dāne pāi nāri sundarī,
Kanyā dāne pāi Indrar purī.*

By giving one's daughter to another person in marriage one achieves heavenly pleasure.

*Khāi la khāi la
Nau śahurilai jāutei,
Śui la śui la
Nau po-jī pāutei.*

This means that a girl is happier before her marriage than after. She has been living peacefully and happily in her parents' home. But once she is married, she is bound to encounter many problems. So a girl is generally advised to enjoy her life before marriage because there is no assurance regarding the possibility of such happiness after her marriage. Thus, this is a kind of warning to a girl about the troublesome and miserable life that awaits her after marriage. This proverb refers to the changing roles in the life of a woman.

There are some proverbs which depict the daughter-in-law in a gloomy frame and show how she is tortured by her in-laws. It is said that to be a daughter is easier than a daughter-in-law because the latter has to follow the rules and regulations in the family as well as in the whole society. A proverb regarding this concept is like this:

Jiyāri habalai ketebeli,

Bowāri habalai tān

It would be tough for a daughter-in-law to survive in a family where even the daughter is not spared the rod. When a daughter is beaten, the daughter-in-law will automatically be frightened by the torture of her in-laws. In this way a daughter-in-law may be controlled by her in-laws as can be seen in the following proverb:

Betik māri bowārik cakowā

Variation,

Betik māri bowārik darowā

(To scare the daughter-in-law by beating one's own daughter.)

Another proverb goes like this

Burhā kathālar murhā,

Jakarowā gharalai bowālī nidibā

Dhekie kariba burhā.

(A daughter-in-law is subjected to greater tortures if there are many members in her in-laws' house.)

From the above discussion, we learn that a girl enjoys peace and happiness before her marriage but she may be tortured by her in-laws after marriage. Proverbs generally present a dark picture of the life of a daughter-in-law. The last three proverbs cast a pale of gloom over the

life of a woman after her marriage. It is said that she will have to follow lots of rules and regulations as a daughter-in-law and she has to set aside all her happiness in her parents' home, and she will also be controlled by her in-laws. In other words, a daughter will have to lose all her freedom that she had enjoyed in her parents' home. The practical wisdom offered by these proverbs is that the best period for a woman to enjoy her life is that before marriage.

After examining some of the Assamese proverbs regarding various roles of woman, we can have some idea about the images of mother vis-à-vis mother-in-law and daughter vis-à-vis daughter-in-law as represented in Assamese proverbs. As we know that kinship has two types- one is 'consanguinity', i.e.; people having blood relationship and the other is 'affinity', i.e.; people come to be related through marriage. Hence we can find out the reason for these different statuses of women from the point of view of the terms of kinship. From the above discussion, we are able to understand that between the two types of kinship system, the former seems to be represented in a 'good' way in proverbs. But the second kind of kinship is always marked by a sense of distrust. After the above discussion, it is seen that mother as the consanguine kin, is represented as a noble character but on the other hand, mother-in-law, as the affine kin, is projected either as decent or as cruel character. Similarly daughter belongs to the consanguinity and is so represented as a sweet and innocent person but the daughter-in-law being a member of affinity, is represented either as a tragic character whose life is bereft of happiness and peace or as conniving and manipulative. While comparing these roles of women on the basis of kinship terms, it is seen that there is a hierarchical order between the two types of kinship relationship. It is based on consanguinity and

affinity in the whole Assamese society as has been reflected in proverbs, e.g.,

Māke cāi mukhalai,

Ghainie cāi hātalai

Here it is seen that on the one hand the mother is glorified by comparing her role with that of the wife. At the same time, the wife is depicted as materialistic and without any concern for her husband's welfare. However, it is the male perspective that moulds women into a particular framework according to their own needs. Women are, therefore, always projected in a certain structure which is not free from patriarchal value judgment. In fact the politics of representing the mother figure in a glorified manner may have relation with the reproduction system. Women are represented as the sex symbols in the society and hence reproduction is supposed to be their main function. For that very reason, the mother figure is assigned an esteemed position. Proverbs contain keys to the understanding of the culture of a certain community. Such knowledge can help us in getting ideas about power structures, social hierarchies and important norms of that particular society. It is important to study proverb as a folklore genre because being a part of language, it is deeply influenced by ideological practices of a society.

5.4. Current Use of Proverbs and Sayings: A Brief Survey

It is important to examine whether proverbs are still in practice in Assam because one of the objectives of the study is to prove that proverb is a living tradition. With this in mind, the present study tries to observe this with the help of different methodological tools. Initially the researcher used the questionnaire method for collecting information regarding the use of proverbs from the people of the various areas of

Nagaon district. With the help of questionnaires, researcher tried to search for various women-related proverbs from the informants and then secondly, to make a query about whether they use these proverbs in their day-to-day affairs or they only memorise them without accepting their practicability. After getting the responses from different respondents irrespective of age and sex, the researcher came to the conclusion that some of the proverbs are still in practice whereas some of them have totally disappeared and some others are discarded by the respondents due to their impracticability in the present world. It is important to inform here that the questionnaire tool is used only to understand the practicability of proverbs in the current context.

As stated earlier, there are other methods which have been used for collecting proverbs for the purpose of the present study. While doing a survey on the current use of proverbs in this particular region, the present study takes the help of the article “Women in Japanese Proverbs” written by Hiroko Storm and published in the journal *Asian Folklore Studies* in the year 1992. Hiroko Storm tries to analyse a few women-related Japanese proverbs on the basis of a questionnaire. The present study has taken a similar model only for analysing the current use of proverbs in the particular society but not for the whole study. For the purpose of analysing other issues, the present study has taken the help of different research tools. As stated in the introduction of the present study the researcher had to rely on informal methods and techniques for the collection of data.

Before describing the current use of proverbs it is important to show the proverbs that are included in the questionnaire as it is not possible to include all the women-related proverbs that were collected from the field. Therefore, the researcher has taken only twenty proverbs based on different characteristics associated with women. First, it is

essential to give a description of some traditional proverbs relating to women based on various characteristics of women reflected in the proverbs such as cunning, fatalism, inferiority, physical Beauty, quarrelsome, selfishness, stupidity, superiority, talkativeness.

5.4.1. Craftiness

Tiri, miri, bhāṭau, kowā,

Ei kāri sajāt nopowā.

Women, the 'Miris' (now called Misings), an ethnic community of Assam, the parrots and the crows cannot be taken into faith. Here the two birds are categorised as mischievous and along with them women and members of that particular ethnic community are treated with disdain. We can see a stereotypical representation of an ethnic community in Assamese proverbs being equated with the supposedly dubious nature of woman.

Kāuri ṭengar, māuri ṭengar

One cannot understand what is going on in the minds of both the crow and the orphan girl. It is generally believed that a girl child is trained up by her mother, especially in matters relating to the performance of household activities. Without her mother, she has to learn these works from other women and while doing so she learns various tricks from them. For this reason she is supposed to be very clever and cunning.

5.4.2. Fatalism

There is a belief that women's fate cannot be predicted by anyone as she has to live two lives, one is before marriage and the other, after. Even their parents leave their lives to the hands of destiny. That is why it is said that:

Jome nileu niyā, jowāye nileu niyā

After her marriage, the parents no longer have any responsibilities toward their daughter. She has to live in her husband's family and it is not important whether or not she is happy in that house.

Rajār jīyārīu kharibhārit pare

Even the daughter of a king may get married to the son of a woodcutter.

Jowāi kolā molā āgeye nakolā,

Tālaike āideuk dilā,

Āideur kapāle ji haise haise,

Purbate bhāigat likhā

There is no use crying over the ugly looks of the husband. It was the result of a preordained destiny.

5.4.3. Inferiority

In many Assamese proverbs, women are depicted as objects of subordination and are shown as inferior beings in comparison to their counterparts. Some of the proverbs of this category are as follows:

Ātār gune ātāni,

Ātā nahole ethāni ebāni

Grandmother's existence is due to grandfather's, she cannot exist without him. So it is said that a woman's identity depends on her husband's existence. She has no independent identity in the society. Manu in *Manusmriti* said, "In childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman may never be independent. This particular *sloka* goes like this:

Pitā rakshati kaumare, bharta raksati yauvane

Raksanti sthavire putra na stri swatantramarhati(Chapter 9, Sloka 3)

And this statement is clearly seen in the present proverb. A grandmother, who has accumulated a lot of experience in the long run of her life, has no identity of her own. She is always recognised by her husband's name. This kind of prejudice can be easily observed in the proverbs of such type.

Patir punye satir punya

A wife is regarded as a chaste woman and her work will be recognized as virtuous if her husband has done a virtuous act. So her character is judged by her husband's deeds. There is another proverb which can be called a variation of this which is '*Patir marane satir maran*', means if the husband dies, then the wife should also be prepared to die. Hence there is no identity for a woman and all her deeds depend on her husband and his acts.

Siyān tirir giyān (gyān) buddhi,

Bhatarat lai kathā sudhi

(A shrewd wife has intelligence enough to act in consultation with her husband.)

Po-nāti dhare āti (or dhare cati)

Jī-nāti japanā kāti

(The grandchildren from the son's side take the responsibilities of the later generation but the grandchildren from the daughter's side should be treated as outsiders.)

Katāri dharāba śile,

Tirotā balābā kile

A knife can be sharpened with a stone and a wife can be dominated by beating and torturing them.

Lorā dhān, sowālī patān

The boy or the son is like the rice plant and the girl or the daughter is like the blighted or immature corn. Hierarchy in the status of girls and boys is clearly reflected in this proverb. Another proverb having almost the same meaning goes like this:

Jī-ti lokar, po-ti bukar(bukur)

The daughter is for other but the son is one's own.

5.4.4. Quarrelsome

Jui dileu mukh noporā

A quarrelsome woman is virtually unstoppable.

Though this proverb does not bear any direct reference to women's nature, it was discovered through a reference in a secondary data that this expression is meant to be referred to women only. The matter was later verified by cross-checking this in the field. Another proverb goes like this:

Saru danta, pātal oṅth

Tāir dekhibā dwandar cot

Women having small teeth and light lips are always quarrelsome.

Predictions of women's quarrelsome nature by observing their different physical structure is a common factor of Assamese proverbs.

5.4.5. Selfishness

Tiriye bisāre śāk-pāt

Āye diye egarāh bhāt

A mother is always concerned over the happiness of her children but the wife is concerned over her own benefit. Though mother is glorified, yet woman in the role of a wife is portrayed as a selfish personality.

5.4.6. Stupidity

Women are always given a secondary status in patriarchal society, being considered to be the 'other'. They are supposed to have inferior brains and there are some proverbs that depict women's lack of intelligence. For instance:

Bātat pāte tirit khāte,

I duyoko ālāgat kāte

Distance should be maintained from the one who begs his wife or the one discusses matters on the road. This proverb is a reference to the supposed stupidity of woman. Whoever listens to her advice will have to face dangerous consequences.

Such stereotypical images related to the dullness of women can be seen in the following two proverbs:

Śiśu nāyak, stri nāyak,

Bahu nāyak, anāyak

A child-leader is as useless as a woman-leader or too many leaders who can only lead to a chaotic situation.

Stri buddhi pralayankāri

Women's advice leads to disaster.

5.4.7. Superiority

It is not that women are always depicted in a degrading way. It is important to mention here that there is a saying in Sanskrit that *Dasa putra sama kanya* which means a daughter is equal to the ten sons. There are a few proverbs which portray them in a slightly positive manner, e.g.,

Mākar bharir talat swarga.

Heaven is under the feet of the mother. Mother is symbolized as occupying a very high status in the world and to show this superiority, she is compared with the heaven which according to the Hindu mythology, is regarded as the most sacred place in the whole universe. The proverb is ornamented with the use of metaphors.

Nāwar garbhe māwar garbhe samān

Mothers are like the boat. She always protects her children from danger like the boat protects people during the time of crossing rivers

The meaning is almost the same with the first one. Here mother is compared to a river. Her affection towards her children is endless like the flow of a river.

Matār hāi kājiā, tiroṭār ghar

It is the woman who transfers the house into a home and the man knows only to quarrel.

Woman is glorified in this proverb. This has its origin in a Sanskrit sloka *Gr̥hiniṅ gr̥hamucyate* which means the same. Another variation of this saying is *gr̥hiniṅyei ghar, gr̥hiniṅ nahole ghar athar abar*. Here, women, in general and women in the role of a wife, in particular, can be called a true homemaker. Without her, a house cannot be called a home. Hence, it seems that these proverbs glorify the status of women. But we can also interpret them from a different lens. Traditionally it is always believed that the place of women should be within the house and they have the principal authority regarding the household activities. The above mentioned saying refers to the idea that man is to the public as woman is to the private.

5.4.8. Loquacity

There is a belief that women talk much. Their counterparts are hardly any match for them on this count. This is a belief that we come across in proverbs

Bāndarar tel, tiroṭār mel

The mischief of monkeys matches the banter of women.

Āpir mukhe kāurir mukhe samān

A girl's talk matches the cawing of a crow.

Tirir mel, kalar bhel

Women's discussion and a raft made of banana leaves have no wait.

5.4.9. Questionnaire on Proverbs about Women

The purpose of the questionnaire was to find out the current use of proverbs in the modern society. The following are some of the objectives of the questionnaire:

- (a) To observe the usage of these proverbs in present times.
- (b) Whether Assamese people categorises Assamese women differently from the women in general.
- (c) Gender-related differences in the proverbs.

The following twenty proverbs have been used in the questionnaire:

1. *Ātār gune ātāni,*
Ātā nahale ethāni ebāni.
2. *Tiri, miri, bhāṭau, kowā,*
Ei cāri saṅāt nopowā.

3. *Stri buddhi pralayankāri.*
4. *Āpir mukhe kāurir mukhe samān.*
5. *Ātaitkoi titā nemu ũengār pāt,
Tātokoi titā māhi āir māt.*
6. *Lorā dhān, ũowāli patān.*
7. *Matār hāi-kajiā, tirotar ghar.*
8. *Beṭik māri bowārik darowā.*
9. *Bāndarar tel, tirotar mel.*
10. *Tirota nāniba bijuli cakuwā, māre miũikiā hāñhi.*
11. *Ṭik baladhā olāi māti,
Māk bhālei jīyek jāti.*
12. *Jowāye nileu niyā, Jame nileu niyā.*
13. *Kacu hale khajuwāi,
Śāhu hale nacuwāi*
14. *Māikir cit, kripanar bit*
15. *Jār gharat matā-muwā tiri,
Tār gharat nāi ciri*
16. *Oñthar opore gophar śārī,
Sei tiri dekhante bāri*
17. *Katāri dharābā śīle,
Tirota balābā kile*
18. *Siyān tirir giyān (gyān) buddhi,
Bhatarat lai kathā sudhi*
19. *Śīsu nāyak, stri nāyak,
Bahu nāyak, anāyak*

20. *Māke cāi mukhalai,*
Ghainie cāi hātalai

The total number of respondents selected was 102. These respondents belong to rural, urban or semi-urban areas. Their knowledge of oral literature including proverbs was tested along with four questions which could be answered with the help of the twenty sample proverbs. These questions were:

- A. According to you which proverb or proverbs is/are true in the case of Assamese women?
- B. Which proverb/proverbs is/are true for women in general?
- C. Which one is not true for the Assamese women?
- D. Which one is not true for women in general?

Table 1: Breakdown of Respondents

		No of Respondents
Sex	Male	44(43%)
	Female	58(57%)
Age	-24	32
	25-34	25
	35-44	22
	45-54	7
	55-	16

Table 2: Gender comparison for question no: A (True for Assamese women)

Degree	Male% (43%)	Female % (57%)
Most acceptable	9.Bāndarar tel, tiroṭār mel (68.19)	11.Ṭik baladhā olāi māṭi, Māk bhālei jīyek jāti (51.72)
Second most acceptable	4.Āpir mukhe kāurir mukhe samān (63.64)	9.Bāndarar tel, tiroṭār mel (50)
Third most acceptable	11.Ṭik baladhā olāi māṭi, Māk bhālei jīyek jāti (54.55)	5.Āṭaitkoi titā nemu ṭengār pāt, Tātokoi titā māhi āir māt (37.93)
Least acceptable	19.Śiśu nāyak,stri nāyak, Bahu nāyak, anāyak (11.36)	17.Katāri dharābā śīle, Tiroṭā balābā kile (5.17)
Second least acceptable	10.Tiroṭā nānibā bijuli cakuwā, māre micikiā hāṇhi (15.9) 16.Oṅthar opore gopnar śārī, Sei tiri dekhante bāri (15.9)	16.Oṅthar opore gopnar śārī, Sei tiri dekhante bāri (6.89)
Third least acceptable	3. Stri buddhi pralayankāri (18.18) 17. Katāri dharābā śīle, Tiroṭā bolābā kile (18.18)	19. Śiśu nāyak, stri nāyak, Bahu nāyak, anāyak (10.34)

Table 3: Gender comparison for question no: B (True for women in general)

Degree	Male %(No:44)	Female % (No:58)
Most acceptable	11.Ṭik baladhā olāi māṭi, Māk bhālei jīyek jāti (54.55)	11.Ṭik baladhā olāi māṭi, Māk bhālei jīyek jāti. (51.72)
Second most acceptable	9.Bāndarar tel,tiroṭār mel (50)	9.Bāndarar tel,tiroṭār mel (39.66)
Third most acceptable	18. Siyān tirir giyān (gyān) buddhi, Bhatarat lai kathā sudhi (45.45)	7. Matār hāi-kajiā, tiroṭār ghar. 14. Māikir cit, kripanar bit. 20. Māke cāi mukhalai, Ghainie cāi hātalai (31.03)
Least acceptable	17. Katāri dharābā śīle, Tiroṭā bolābā kile. (6.81)	16.Ōṅthar opore gopar śārī, Sei tiri dekhante bāri. 17. Katāri dharābā śīle, Tiroṭā bolābā kile (3.45)
Second least acceptable	16.Ōṅthar opore gopar śārī, Sei tiri dekhante bāri (9.09)	19. Śīsu nāyak, stri nāyak, Bahu nāyak, anāyak. (6.89)
Third least acceptable	8. Beṭik māri bowārīk darowā. 13. Kacu hale khajuwāi Śāhu hale nacuwāi (11.36)	8. Beṭik māri bowārīk darowā (10.34)

Table 4: Gender comparison for question no: C (Not True for Assamese women)

Degree	Male%(No: 44)	Female % (No: 58)
Most acceptable	17.Katāri dharābā śīle, Tiroṭā balāba kile. (54.55)	17.Katāri dharābā śīle, Tiroṭā balābā kile. (48.28)
Second most acceptable	2. Tiri, miri, bhātau, kowā, Ei cāri sajāt nopowā. 16. Oṅthar opore gophar śāri, Sei tiri dekhante bāri. (43.18)	8. Betik māri bowārik darowā. (44.83)
Third most acceptable	3. Stri buddhi pralayankāri. 6. Lorā dhan, sowālī patān. (38.64)	3. Stri buddhi pralayankāri. (43.1)
Least acceptable	19.Śīsu nāyak,stri nāyak, Bahu nāyak, anāyak(0)	7. Matār hāi-kājiā, tiroṭār ghar (5.17)
Second least acceptable	9. Bāndarar tel,tiroṭār mel. 11.Ṭik baladhā olāi māṭi, Māk bhālei jīyek jāti. (2.27)	9.Bāndarar tel,tiroṭār mel. 11.Ṭik baladhā olāi māṭi, Māk bhālei jīyek jāti. 18.Siyān tirir giyān(gyān) buddhi, Bhatarat lai kathā sudhi. (8.62)
Third least acceptable	4.Āpir mukhe kāurir mukhe Samān. (4.55)	1. Ātār gunē ātāni, Ātā nahale ethāni ebāni. (12.06)

Table 5: Gender comparison for question no: D (Not True for women in general)

Degree	Male %(No:44)	Female % (No:58)
Most acceptable	3. Stri buddhi pralayankāri. 6. Lorā dhān, cowālī patān. (52.27)	6. Lora dhān, cowālī patān. (55.17)
Second most acceptable	17.Katāri dharābā śīle, Tiroṭā balābā kile. (45.45)	3. Stri buddhi pralayankāri. (51.72)
Third most acceptable	5.Ātāitkoi titā nemu ṭengār pāt, Tātokoi titā māhi āir māt. (43.18)	17.Katāri dharābā śīle, Tiroṭā balābā kile. (46.55)
Least acceptable	4.Āpir mukhe kāurir mukhe samān. 11.Ṭik baladhā olāi māṭi, Māk bhālei jīyek jāti. (4.55)	11.Ṭik baladhā olāi māṭi, Māk bhālei jīyek jāti. (5.17)
Second least acceptable	9.Bāndarar tel,tiroṭār mel. 18.Siyān tirir giyān(gyān) buddhi, Bhatarat lai kathā sudhi. (11.36)	18.Siyān tirir giyān(gyān) buddhi, Bhatarat lai kathā sudhi. (8.62)
Third least acceptable	14. Māikir cit, kripanar bit. (15.9)	9.Bāndarar tel,tiroṭār mel. 14. Māikir cit, kripanar bit. (18.97)

5.4.10. Analysis on the basis of the tables

After the collection of empirical data, it has been found that there are some important points which need to be studied. In this study the views of the respondents are divided on the basis of their gender and it is seen that some of the proverbs become stereotypical in the social context of Assamese culture e.g., proverb number 4, i.e. *Āpir mukhe kāurir mukhe samān* and proverb number 9, i.e. *Bāndarar tel, tiroṭār mel* reflect the loquacity of women. These two proverbs show that gossiping is a part of woman's character. It is not that men never gossip but it has not invited the same kind of attention. So this is a statement on the continuation of gender stereotypes. Most of the people have a preconceived mindset which may not be free from biases of social construct. It is important to see that the female respondents along with the males also agree to the view that women talk more or that they always gossip.

Again Proverb number 11, i.e. *Ṭik baladhā olāi māṭi, Māk bhālei jīyek jāti* is the most acceptable one for the female respondents and it occupies the third highest position among the male respondents. From this it can be said that people, irrespective of their gender, have the idea that continuation of values like cultural, social, family values, religious values depend upon the female members of the society. They have a notion that it is the women of one generation, who can transmit any kind of moral values to the other generation and again it is the duty of the women of the later generation who inherit values from the earlier generations.

From these three proverbs which figure at the top of the tables, the internalisation of gender roles by female respondents becomes clear. Men have such ideas because of the influence of patriarchy but along with them, women also accept the stereotypical roles. On the other hand, if we look at those proverbs which have got low response from both

male and female respondents, on question numbers A and B as well as high responses on the question numbers C and D, we get a different idea e.g., proverb number 3 i.e. *Stri buddhi pralayankāri*, number 6 i.e. *Lorā dhān, cowālī patān*), number 16 *Oṅthar opare gophar śārī, sei tiri dekhante bāri*, number 17 *Katāri dharābā śīle, tiroṭā balābā kile*. So, it can be said that some kind of changes have been taking place in the point of view of people of the present world. These kinds of proverbs may no longer have any influence on society and from this particular point, it can be seen that along with the changes in the views of people regarding these proverbs, the earlier proverbs which are regarded as stereotypical in the society, may one day undergo a change. It may take some time for this change, yet it is necessary to stress upon the study of such aspects of proverbs.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

This chapter broadly highlights three aspects of the thesis. Firstly, it provides a concise summary of all the chapters. Secondly, it provides a critical analysis of the observations made, and finally, it suggests the conclusions thereof.

The first chapter of this study provides the framework for the whole work. It mainly deals with the objectives of the study, research methodology, review of literature, area of research, and the limitations of the work done. The chapter highlights the theoretical framework of the study.

The second chapter mainly emphasises the theoretical aspects related to the concept of construction of womanhood. This chapter gives an idea about how womanhood is constructed in patriarchal society and introduces related theoretical concepts. This chapter is divided into various sub-chapters which deal with different aspects of such constructs.

A brief account of the historical ramifications of feminism is also highlighted in this chapter. It describes how feminism came into its own in the later half of the twentieth century to critique and also to question the constructed nature of gender identities. Along with these, the chapter also shows how feminist movements have influenced the reading of representation of women in folk and literary genres. Finally, the chapter discusses the history of women in India with particular reference to their representation in various genres.

The concluding part of this chapter analyses the way in which constructed images of ideal femininity are naturalised in society. To this end, various theoretical terms like representation, ideology, hegemony, and patriarchy are discussed and analysed.

The third chapter throws light on the representation of women in the various genres of folklore that are popular among the people of Assam. In doing this, the folklore genres of the various ethnic groups of Assam are left out due to research limitations as stated in the first chapter of this work. In addition, proverbial expressions are also kept aside since a detailed account of this is provided in the following two chapters. The folklore items used here are directly linked with the construction of womanhood. The chapter is divided into various sub-chapters on the basis of different phases of development in women from their very childhood till old age.

Folktales, myths, legends, customs, beliefs, superstitions and folksongs are taken for analysis and finally it is seen that womanhood is constructed in the traditional Assamese society as the 'other', the inferior being, the symbol of reproduction, the one who is 'rightfully' confined to the domestic sphere.

The fourth chapter provides a broad overview of proverb and its scholarship. It starts with a theoretical discussion on proverbs and paremiology and its various sub-genres like sayings, phrases, idioms and adages.

The researcher begins with a discussion on folklore scholarship in general to shed light on the diverse fields of study that infused life into the study of folklore. It is observed that the trends of folklore scholarship have changed over the years. While discussing the history of

such scholarship, the present study tries to unearth the possible reasons for such changes.

The fifth chapter is about construction of womanhood in proverbs and other allied genres. Construction of womanhood as represented in the proverbs in Assamese is analysed in this chapter. Though the term 'proverb' has been used, some other expressive forms like sayings, phrases, idioms, adages are also included. This has been done intentionally because there are a number of expressive forms closely allied to proverbs which can serve as good examples of the representative genres where we can see the construction of womanhood.

This chapter is again divided into various sub-chapters. It tries to examine how female body and beauty are represented in Assamese proverbs, sayings and other sub-genres of proverbs. The most popular and most common motifs of Assamese proverbs—the co-wife and step-mother motifs are taken into account and are discussed with reference to the way in which they are placed within a stereotyped framework to find out the reasons behind the understanding and acceptance of such motifs in society. The chapter also tries to discuss various roles of woman as represented in the proverbs such as daughter, sister, mother, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law and mother-in-law and then tries to analyse the treatment of these characters from the point of view of kinship roles. From this analysis, an idea about the social positioning of woman can be observed. It is seen that woman having consanguine relationship is slightly better off than one having an affine relationships.

Finally, this chapter examines whether the proverbs continue to be in vogue. For that matter, a survey has been done in the said area of study with the help of a questionnaire and conclusion drawn to find out the relevance of these proverbs in the present day context. A thorough analysis of the secondary and primary data reveals that with the growth

of education and awareness regarding gender equity in society, some proverbs have come to be considered obsolete and unacceptable in the present day.

It is seen that commonsensical knowledge is always constructed by the dominant group of the society and literary genres can be used as a weapon to establish this constructed knowledge. Likewise, proverb as an analytical category of folklore has also been used for the same purpose. As we know that proverbs are always metaphorical in structure, there are many ways to interpret them from varied perspectives. The ethnic genres of proverbs constitute the wisdom of the society, in fact the approved documents of wisdom. Therefore, these genres are also used as the tools for generating and propagating the biases of the society. These can therefore, be used for strengthening the stereotypical role of woman in society.

Women who are outside the normative models of society are considered to be abnormal, witch, evil, disobedient and cruel. While analysing the proverbs it is seen that some of the roles played by woman are always portrayed in a glorifying manner. For instance, the mother is always seen to be given a position almost equal to God. There is not a single proverb found which speaks against her. She is represented as the symbol of solace, love, care and emotion. Mother's attachment to her children is mainly represented as in the domestic sphere, with the distribution of food. Therefore, food has a deep relationship with the idea of motherhood. The following is a case in point:

Pitri bine prithivi mahābhār

Mātri bine bhojan cārakhār

Bhātri bine śature pāi lāi

Bhārjyā bine kucit nāpāi thāi

(Meaning-without father one has to face problem in the world, without mother problems in foods, without brother neighbours may take advantage and without wife there is no place in the world.)

Construction of motherhood is seen to be represented almost in the same way in proverbs as well as in the other genres of folklore like folktale, myth, legend and folksong. But it is interesting to observe that nowhere in the various genres is the mother represented as a strong character. There is not a single shred of evidence to suggest that mothers are capable of heroism. From this, it can be said that mothers have no decision-making capacity within the hegemonic power structure.

The present thesis tries to identify how female subjectivity is constructed in patriarchal society and how women are represented in the medium of proverbs and other sub-genres of proverbs in Assamese. It is well known that the process of socialization plays a pivotal role in giving a systematic structure to the society.

From all the discussions that have been done in the earlier chapters of the work, it is seen that women are always treated as subordinate and inferior and these attitudes are clearly seen in the varied genres of folklore. Most interestingly, women themselves have internalised these constructed roles to the extent that they cannot differentiate what is biological and natural and what is constructed. Their acceptance thus, creates a kind of dependence on their male counterparts. This may lead to the idea of the various social constructs related to women such as the construction of woman's work, woman's space and overall construction of womanhood.

The main aim of this dissertation is to see how women are represented in the Assamese proverbs and so the main focus is on the construction of womanhood and the proverbs are used only as the

medium of such representation. It is interesting to observe that sometimes proverbs can also be used for resistance, offering the scope of liberation for women. In other words, the female voice can also be heard through the medium of proverbs. What is impossible in reality can be possible in proverbs. As stated earlier, proverbs can offer an alternative space for women, providing them the scope to contest the dominant stereotypes. However, the number of such proverbs in the Assamese language is very few. Here is an example of an Assamese proverb which goes like this:

Cābate cabakā, nāṅgalate phāl

Sarujani ghainie carto mārile

Camāhaloi bisāle gāl

(Meaning—the youngest wife’s slap pains a lot for six months.)

Here it is seen that the wife can slap her husband but in reality such sight is very rare in a traditional Assamese society. In this society the wife does not have the power or courage to slap her husband as she considers him as her god.

In traditional Assamese society there is a custom that the wife must have the remnant of food eaten by her husband and the reverse act is simply ridiculous in this society. But most interestingly, a proverb depicting such deed goes like this:

Jowāieno kimān khāba

Jīr pātar muthiei haba

(Meaning—the son-in-law cannot have much but what is there in his wife’s plate is sufficient for him.)

The son-in-law here is represented as the subordinate character who can take the remaining portions of the food eaten by his wife. This can be an example of a proverb offering an alternative social order.

The above-mentioned proverbs can be called deviations of common stereotypes. All said and done, there are proverbs that are capable of challenging the traditional gender-based hierarchy of society. Though this particular discussion is not included in the present thesis, it could be an interesting area for further research. In that sense proverbs can be studied from a different light.

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APPENDIX I

List of Informants

NAME OCCUPATION	SEX	PLACE	
Ajanta Sharma Servent	F, 44	Samoguri, Nagaon	Govt.
Anjana Sharma	F, 57	Dakhinpat, Nagaon	Home maker
Anu Goswami	F, 85	Malou Ali, Jorhat	-do-
Anurupa Bhattacharjee	F, 72	Amolapatty, Nagaon	-do-
Atul Kalita	M, 15	Majpathari, Nagaon	Student
Archana Sharma	F, 49	Amolapatty, Nagaon	Govt. Servent
Aruna Baruah	F, 59	Ratnapur, Nagaon	-do-
Atul Bhattacharjee Servent	M, 70	Amolapatty, Nagaon	Rtd. Govt.
Bhadra Kalita,	M, 56	Raha, Nagaon	Social worker
Bidyadhar Kalita	M, 44	Diphalu, Nagaon	Farmer
Bijit Bora	M, 34	Dhing, Nagaon	Teacher
Brajalata Goswami	F, 52	Nanai, Nagaon	Home-maker
Chao Lokeswar Gogoi	M, 85	Raha, Nagaon	Folklorist
Dimbeswari Mahanta	F, 92	Dhing, Nagaon	-do-
Isani Bora	F, 29	Sivanagar, Nagaon	School Teacher

Jiban Bora Servant	M, 70	Sivanagar, Nagaon	Rtd. Govt.
Kakali Sharma	F, 40	Dimoruguri, Nagaon	Govt. Servant
Khageswar Nath	M, 82	Pathari, Nagaon	-do-
Lalit Sharmah Worker	M, 68	Haiborgaon, Nagaon	Social
Malati Pandit Helper	F, 58	Napaam, Tezpur	Domestic
Mira Sharma	F, 56	Haiborgaon, Nagaon	Social worker
Manu Pujari	F, 75	Malou Ali, Jorhat	Home-maker
Monoranjan Baruah Servent	M, 70	Ratnapur, Nagaon	Rtd. Govt.
Nagen Mishra	M, 69	Ratnapur, Nagaon	Social Worker
Mukut Bora	M, 31	Diphalu, Nagaon	-do-
Niranjan Bora	M, 22	Raha, Nagaon	Student
Padmendranarayan Servent Goswami	M, 86	Ratnapur, Nagaon	Rtd. Govt.
Phulkumari Kalita Paremiographist	F, 57	Barpetaroad, Barpeta	Folklorist and
Pradip Saikia Servent	M, 74	Ratnapur, Nagaon	Rtd. Govt.
Pranab Bora	M, 51	Diphalu, Nagaon	School Teacher
Pranita Saikia	F, 15	Dhing, Nagaon	School Student
Pratibha Bora	F, 87	Amolapatty, Nagaon	Home-maker

Punyeswar Tamuli Teacher	M, 86	Chandmari, Golaghat	Rtd.School
Purabi Bora Student	F, 20	Puranigudam, Nagaon	College
Rupa Devi	F, 40	Lanka, Nagaon	Home-maker
Sayeda Rosy Khatun helper	F, 42	Dhing, Nagaon	Domestic
Sandhya Das	F, 39	Rupahi, Nagaon	-do-
Saru Saikia	F, 67	Ratnapur, Nagaon	Social Worker
Sayeda Parviz Ahmed	F, 49	Diphalu, Nagaon	Home-maker
Sunil kr. Saikia	M, 32	Amolapatty, Golaghat	Govt. Servant
Suvarna Bhattachrjee	F, 63	Amolapatty, Nagaon	Home-maker
Taru Mishra	F, 67	Ratnapur, Nagaon	Social Worker
Tapan Saikia	M, 32	Amolapatty, Nagaon	Teacher
Uttam Talukdar	M, 31	Nanai, Nagaon	Govt. Servant

APPENDIX II

List of a Few Examples Of Assamese Proverbs Related To Women

Ākhair tapat, tirir śapat
Sri luitar bāli
Iyāt ji sajāt jāi, dinate ducaku khāli

(There are some thing which cannot be dependable and the swear of the wife is one of them because women generally swear on trifles.)

Bāñjie nubuje powatir mol

(The value of children cannot be understood by a woman who does not have children.)

Bāri naṣṭa hai māje lai bāt
Tiri naṣṭa hai, ghane behāi hāt

(The field can be damaged if thoroughfare is there in the middle part of it. Likewise a woman becomes bad if she goes to the market very frequently.)

Beśyār ki ekādaśī

(There is no meaning to follow any rituals by the prostitutes.)

Briiddha beś' yā bhaktani

(Prostitutes become worshippers of God in their old age.)

Gāir teṣṭibā ulamābāhi
Tir, nānibā kathāi kathāi hāhi

(A woman should be discarded if she laughs too much)

Hārinaṣ' Man, śai boiri
Tirutar Rupqi Airi

(Woman's beauty is her enemy.)

Māc lobh, dhan lobh, tiri lobh

(Fish, money and woman can be easily attracted by people.)

Māj Murat nāi culi

Poyyēke māte rupahi buli

(The wife is the most beautiful woman in the eyes of her husband though she is bald.)

Pehi māhi bhari āce gāon

Āi nāikiā laghone jāo.

(There is no parallel to a mother. In spite of the presence of other kith and kin, one has to stay hungry in the absence of mother.)

Rajār Dandit kaṭā jāi

Tirir dandit paitā/pantā khāi.

(the king's punishments are difficult to bear but the wife's punishments are not severe since she has soft corner for her husband.)
