THE "OFFENDING FEMALE" AND VIOLENCE AS NEGATIVE SANCTION:

A STUDY OF FOLKTALES OF ASSAM

Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

PRERANA SAHARIA

CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
NEW DELHI-110067, INDIA
2018

जवाहरलाल नेहरू विश्वविद्यालय
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
NEW DELHI-110067

Centre for the Study of Social Systems
School of Social Sciences

Tel.: 26704408
Email: chair_csss@mail.jnu.a

Date: 23 July 2018

DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation entitled "The 'Offending Female' and Violence as Negative Sanction: A Study of Folktales of Assam" submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** is my own work. The dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other University.

Prerana Saharia

Prerana Saharia

CERTIFICATE

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

Chairperson, CSSS

Chairperson
CSSS/SSS
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi - 110067

Dr. A. Bimol Akoijam

Assc. Supervisor
Centre for the Study
of Social Systems
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

GLOSSARY

Adivasis: Original inhabitants.

Agni-pariksha: In literal sense, it means 'test by fire'.

*Ambubachi mela***:** An annual gathering / festival of Hindu pilgrims held at Kamakhya temple in Guwahati, Assam. In adherence to religious beliefs, it is the celebration of the annual menstruation course of goddess Kamakhya during the monsoon season in the Assamese month of *Ahaar* (around mid-June).

Anchal: A part of the *chadar-* a piece of women's clothing draped around the upper body.

Deudhoni nritya: A ritualistic dance performed by a woman in a trance, usually in a temple, when possessed by the deity.

Dheki: A dheki is an agricultural tool used for threshing, to separate rice grains from their outer husks, while leaving the bran layer, thus producing brown rice.

Hasoti: A piece of cloth like a handkerchief used to carry beetle leaf and areca nut.

*Izzat***:** A Hindi/Urdu word that can be loosely translated to 'honour'

Junuka: A small bell/ ornament

Kalika Puran: One of the eighteen minor *Puranas* in the Shaktism tradition of Hinduism.

Kauravas: A Sanskrit term for the descendants of Kuru, a legendary king who is the ancestor of many of the characters of the *Mahabharata*.

Kesaikhaiti goxani: A fierce goddess, a local deity.

Kirtanghar: A Vaishnavite prayer hall.

Lakshman-rekha: In the *Ramayana*, it is a line drawn by Lakshmana around their dwelling in *Panchavati* forest during their exile, which was meant to protect Sita while he went searching for Rama.

Mahabharata: One of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, it is the legendary narrative of the events leading up to the Battle of Kurukshetra, the battle itself and the aftermath of the battle.

Numoliya: Youngest/ latest.

Ojhas: Traditional medicine-men or witch doctors.

Ow: Elephant apple (scientific name: Dillenia Indica). Also called *Ow-tenga*, it is an acidic fruit used in Assamese cooking.

Pitha: Loosely translated as rice-cakes or sweets made of rice-powder, pitha can be made in a number of ways like steaming, roasting, frying etc.

Ramayana: The other Sanskrit epic of ancient India, originally an epic poem narrating the struggle of the divine prince Rama to rescue his wife Sita from the demon king Ravana.

Sadhukatha/ Sadhu/ Xadhu: Folktale/story.

Sandah: A powder made of roasted rice grains, eaten as a porridge.

Sati: Pious/ chaste woman.

Skandapurana: The largest *Mahapurana*, a genre of eighteen Hindu religious texts.

Sita-haran: An episode in the *Ramayana* depicting the events of the kidnapping of Sita by Ravana.

Tulosi: The Assamese word for the Hindi *tulsi.* It is a small bushy plant considered sacred by the Hindus.

Thupori: The term is a sexist bias against women, used to refer to both an unskilled woman and a woman who remains a spinster because she is unattractive.

Cheer-haran: An episode in the Mahabharata that describes the de-robing of Draupadi by Dushashana.

Yogini Tantra: A 16th or 17th century tantric text by an unknown author from Assam, dedicated to the worship of the Hindu goddesses Kali and Kamakhya.

CHAPTER 1

SETTING THE STAGE: GENDERED VIOLENCE IN FOLKTALES

…. The step-mother is in a fit of rage. In the middle of the night, she coerces her teenaged step-daughter to continue putting paddy into the hollow of the 'dheki' while she pounds on at the other end, crushing the girl's three limbs one after the other. She orders the girl to continue with her left foot- the last remaining limb and crushes it too under the dheki. And then she commands her to continue the job with her head, which eventually gets crushed as well, killing the poor girl….

…. the mother sleeps peacefully outside her newly-wed daughter's room as she expects her daughter to enjoy her wedding night with the python that she's been married to and be laden with gold by the next morning. She has such expectations because she had previously plotted to get her step-daughter killed by marrying her off to a python and making her spend the night with her new husband. But there had been an unexpected turn of events and the step-daughter's husband turned out to be a god/ jungle spirit, who bestowed her with precious ornaments instead of devouring her….

1.1. Folktales as Field of Study

These are, but two poignant scenes from an Assamese feature film *Kothanodi* (2015) by filmmaker Bhaskar Hazarika. He reimagined four popular folktales from Assam as a narrative about four women fighting demons of their own in life. These are just two instances from the vast array of folktales in Assam. These folktales have been recounted on innumerable occasions over the decades by people in the Assamese society and they continue to do so, sometimes as a means of entertainment, sometimes to recount the 'good old days', often as bed-time stories for children and to give them a moral lesson.

Every human society traditionally has folklore as a vital part of their existence and they are a rich and authentic source of the values of the society which they belong to. According to

William Bascom (1965), myths, legends and folktales belong to the same genre of folklore. He defines each of these three forms of narratives in his work, which shall be discussed further in this study. However, borrowing from Bascom's work we can state in short that myths have their foundation in reason- they are stories that attempt to explain the origins or functions of natural phenomena. Legends, on the other hand, have their source in memories about some historic person, event or place, and folktales are based on the imagination of people and are meant for entertainment. They are a part of folklore too. Since folktales depict a variety of issues pertaining to everyday life and act in a prescriptive role to prepare younger generations to adapt better to the social life of the community, folktales play a very crucial part in the lives of people. Therefore, when certain popular folktales from Assam consist of several graphic depictions of violence, it becomes important to consider the reasons behind it. There have been very few questions raised about the vivid imagery of violence in these tales. As a child, one doesn't understand the gravity of such a description and the words may appear as mere words that describe a fantastical world which is nowhere close to reality. The way these tales are recounted as something that happened at some point in the past, would also make it difficult for a child to relate to such gory depictions as real, unless they witness some sort of domestic violence or are themselves victims of aggression of their parents or close family members. However, once these ideas have taken roots in a child's mind they can grow and transform into their perception of reality, especially when they get socialized in a society that upholds similar values about gender roles and relations.

1.2. Assam: A Brief Introduction

The state of Assam, also known as the Assam province during the British rule in India, became a principality of British India in 1826 after the Treaty of Yandaboo was signed between the Burmese and the British East India Company marking the end of the First Anglo-Burmese War. It also marked the end of the long period of about six hundred years of Ahom rule in Assam and the beginning of what has been termed by historians as the modern period of the history of Assam. There is a lack of credible historical records about the region prior to 12th century A.D. Therefore, the history of this period, i.e. roughly between 360-1206 A.D., has been constructed on the basis of inscriptions on rocks and copper plates, and in religious texts like the *Kalika Puran* and *Yogini Tantra*. There are also certain records in Buddhist texts and records of foreign travellers, and the region also finds mention in the *Mahabharata*. The ancient period of the history of Assam is a mixture of legends and mythological accounts. The region was earlier known as Kamarupa and the legends mention that King Narakasur made Pragjyotishpur his

capital. He worshipped Lord Vishnu, who taught him to worship Goddess Kamakhya. But under the influence of the King of Sonitpur, BanAsur, he grew arrogant of his powers. He proposed marriage to the Goddess Kamakhya and she accepted on the condition that he got a temple and a tank constructed on the Nilachal Hill and paved a road to the temple, all of this within a night. When the goddess realized that he was about to accomplish the task, she made a rooster crow to mark dawn, although it was still far from dawn, told him that he had failed and refused to marry him. He was eventually killed by Lord Vishnu in his Krishna avatar. There is also a legend about his son and successor King Bhagadatta, a fierce warrior who is frequently mentioned in the *Mahabharata* and was killed by Lord Krishna in the Battle of Kurukshetra, while fighting alongside the *Kauravas*. There are numerous legends and myths associated with this region and its people mostly based on Hindu mythology such as that of the role of the river Brahmaputra, the origin of the Kamakhya Temple, or the Umananda island in the middle of the Brahmaputra, to name a few.

A long line of kings from a number of dynasties ruled over this region which is today known as Assam. This includes the powerful Ahom dynasty that emerged around 1228 A.D. Written history is only available since the Ahom rule which lasted for about six hundred years from 1228 to 1826. Gunaviram Barua (1972) and Sir Edward Gait (2012/1906) are two historians who have written comprehensive accounts of the history of Assam in their respective books. The Ahoms, belonging to the Tai (Shan) section of the Siamese-Chinese branch of the Sino-Tibetans, arrived in this region through northern Burma (currently Myanmar) and they consolidated a powerful kingdom in the region over the years by bringing a number of the local chieftains and rulers under their dominion through the use of both diplomacy and force. The indigenous population that the Ahoms came in contact with included a number of kingdoms and communities spread across the region such as the Koch, Chutia, Miri (Mishing), Rabha, Kachari, Moran, Matak, Mikir (Karbi), Borahi, Naga, Jaintia, Manipuri etc. All these communities had their own way of life, different food habits, attire, language, festivals and even religion, although in later years they began converting to Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. The Ahoms also came into contact with the Mughals and other Muslim dynasties from time to time. Some historical accounts state that Muslim rulers from the rest of India attacked this region about seventeen times and although they could not conquer the region, some of them stayed back and settled down, married the local women and became a part of the region. At the peak of its power, the Ahom kingdom stretched from the Bhutan Hills in the North and to the Naga, Mikir, Khasi and Garo hills on the south, till the Singphou, Khamti and

Misimi ranges in the east and the river Manaha in the west. Over the years, the region has been known by names like Pragjyotishpur and Kamarupa, and the name 'Assam' is of much recent origin. After Assam became a part of the British Indian administration, Cachar (annexed in 1832) and Jaintia Hills (annexed in 1835) were added to the existing territorial entity and Assam was made a separate province in 1874 with Shillong as its capital. During partition of India in 1947, the Sylhet region was merged with East Bengal (now Bangladesh). Moreover, the states of Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram were carved out as separate states after independence. The territorial area of Assam at present is 78,438 sq.kms and the state is divided into thirty-three districts. The terrain is a mixture of hills and plains. The Brahmaputra is the largest river but there is an extensive network of streams and rivulets that drain into the Brahmaputra from the surrounding hills. There is a wide range of flora- mainly tropical evergreen and deciduous forests, broad-leaved hill forests, pine forests, and swamp forests, as well as grasslands - and fauna (Lodrick & Das, 2015). The state is known as the home of the endangered one-horned rhinoceros and has numerous wildlife sanctuaries.

According to the Census 2011, the total population of Assam is 31,169,272. Assam has a tribal population of 12.4%, which includes the indigenous population of Bodo, Rabha, Mishing, Deori, Tiwa, Khamti, Chutia, Sonowal, Kachari, Rajbongshi, Phakial, Dimasa, Karbi, to name a few. There are also the tribal communities commonly known as tea-garden labourers (TGL) with origins in the Chhotanagpur region, who were brought as indentured labourers by the British in the 1860s to work in the tea plantations of Assam. These people are not considered as Scheduled Tribes (ST) in Assam although they lie at the economic and social margins and belong to a separate stratum of the state economy where they are denied the incentives attached to the ST status. In terms of religion too, Assam is quite diverse with people adhering to Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism among the major religions, animism and naturism and the worship of a wide range of local deities. Hinduism is the religion of the majority with about 61.47 percent of the total population of Assam identifying as followers of Hinduism. The second largest religious group is followers of Islam with 34.22 percent. Christianity is followed by 3.74 percent, whereas followers of Jainism constitute 0.08 percent. Sikhism is followed by 0.07 percent, Buddhism by 0.07 percent as well, and around 0.09 percent of the people follow 'other religions' (2011). All these communities have their own festivals and food habits, but the three Bihu festivals celebrated in the months of Bohag (mid-April), Kati (mid-October) and Magh (mid-January) are considered as the main festival of the state because almost every community celebrates this festival albeit with their own

traditional touches to it. Rice is a staple food item supplemented by a variety of vegetables, fruits, fish and meat. Weaving is an important aspect of the cultural life of the people, particularly women (Lodrick & Das, 2015). The economy is mostly rural, based on agriculture, fishing and forestry with some small scale industrial enterprises. Manufacturing sector is slowly growing in the state, but there has been a well-developed industry based on petroleum and tea.

In Assam, the kinship structure is principally patriarchal in nature. Irawati Karve (1994) studied the kinship systems followed by different communities all over India and classified them broadly into four categories that she calls zones, namely, the northern zone, the eastern zone, the southern zone and the central zone. According to this classification, the kinship systems in Assam falls within the northern zone and hence, shares similarities to those in the north Indian states. In Assam, women are exchanged in marriage, and most of the communities follow a patrilocal system of residence. The system of inheritance is largely patrilineal. There is a certain notion of morality, honour and shame attached to the conduct of women, which is more prominent than that attached to the conduct of men. Moreover, there are different words that refer to daughters and daughters-in-law, which also indicates the difference in their treatment within the household and the role expectations associated with it. Although the restrictions on the daughter is more relaxed within the household than that on the daughter-in-law, the daughter is supposed to be adept at weaving and managing the household and to have learnt to perform all the household chores at her natal home before marriage. There are also class/ caste related expectations in the behaviour of women and different religious groups may have slight variations in their everyday aspects.

1.3. An Outline of Concepts

The narration of folktales has been an important part of oral tradition (Ong, 1984) and has been around for centuries. Narrating tales is considered as an art and in most societies, there are very few people who are considered to be masters of this art form. Narrating a tale is more of a performance, with voice modulations, facial expressions, hand and body gestures being an essential part of the process of narration. The performance of the narrator is equally important as the story itself because it helps in building up the atmosphere for the tale. The narrator modernizes, adapts and personalizes the tale to suit the audience. For instance, in Mexico all the renowned "legitimate" storytellers are usually men, who perform in the public sphere in front of a wide gathering (Raby, 2007). The act of narrating a folktale serves certain purposes

in the society. When someone is recognized as a specialist in that field, the narrator then performs as what Bourdieu calls an 'authorized spokesperson' (1982, pp. 107-113) because in their talk, there is a perfect equation between the discourse and the social function of the speaker and the group for whom they speak, recognises their legitimacy (Raby, 2007). The oral medium allows the narrator a lot of fluidity and flexibility. But when these tales are written down they become more rigid. Although there is always room for altering the written texts as well, it still misses out on the nuanced variations that every narrator brings to the performance.

Sanjeev Kumar Nath (2011) writes that "Folktales originate, grow, and are circulated among the people, and hence the issues that affect the people get to be represented in the tales in various ways" (p. 17). Therefore, many of the tales and stories prevalent in the society tend to voice concerns or present criticism of certain issues in that society. Nath states that just as in other societies with a rich tradition of folktales, in the Assamese society too, there exist certain tales which express very "primitive ideas about the status of women" (2011, p. 16). But there are few tales that question the dominant ideas about women's role and position within the family or in the society in general. Since folktales are supposed to be told for the purpose of entertainment mainly, they often tend to be farcical and exaggerate many things. But it is also true that they give us an insight into the gender relations in a society. They reflect "the manner in which tradition sanctions a certain kind of behaviour towards women, a certain kind of attitude to the issue of gender" (Nath, 2011, p. 30).

Assam has a long and rich tradition of storytelling which has been kept alive by people of all age-groups who engage in the process of narrating and listening to tales (Nath, 2011). Folktales in Assam, just like in many places across the world, are used as pedagogic tools. Narration as a teaching and learning method has been as widely used as it has been used for the purpose of socialization and communication (Grammatas, 2015). They are meant to teach children the ways of living of the community, their morals and values, the prescriptions and proscriptions of behaviour and rituals etc. When these tales are narrated to children, they tend to imagine the scenario, and identify with the characters. Therefore, inequalities, such as those in the form of gender bias or class hierarchy narrated in the tales can have powerful impact on the minds of the children (Nath, 2011).

The concept of 'sanctions'- both positive and negative- in the context of the society as a collective has been borrowed from the works of Emile Durkheim (1960/1893). Durkheim writes that the actions of individuals are monitored by the community which is itself a

collective of individuals who are bound by shared values and rules. The actions of an individual in society are therefore either rewarded (positive sanctions) or punished (negative sanctions) based on whether those actions are considered as acceptable or unacceptable, respectively. The Encyclopaedia Britannica (1998) states that "Sanction**,** in the social sciences, a reaction (or the threat or promise of a reaction) by members of a social group indicating approval or disapproval of a mode of conduct and serving to enforce behavioural standards of the group". It further states that the function of sanctions, whether positive or negative, is to regulate conduct in conformity with social norms. Sanctions can be diffuse or organized, and both formal rewards and informal scorn would be considered as sanctions. "Negative sanctions are actual or threatened punishments, whereas positive sanctions are actual or promised rewards" (Sanction, 1998). In the folktales of Assam which have been analysed for this study, violence against women is examined as a negative sanction, which is seen in both the formal and informal form in the folktales.

Violence is present everywhere in society. It can be seen and experienced in various forms in everyday life: in the media, on the streets, schools, workplaces and other public places, within the domestic sphere, and even in our everyday speech whether literally (in recounting events occurring around the world) or figuratively (in terms of violent phrases pervading our everyday speech) (Kaufman, 2014). According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary (2018), violence can be defined as '…the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage or destroy…. to harm a person or damage property…'. The American Psychological Association (2017) defines violence as '…an extreme form of aggression, such as assault, rape or murder…'. Johan Galtung (1969), while writing on the definition and dimensions of violence notes that "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (p. 168). He defines violence as the cause of the difference between what could have been and what is. He argues that "when the potential is higher than the actual is by definition *avoidable* and when it is avoidable, then violence is present. When the actual is unavoidable, then violence is not present even if the actual is at a very low level" (Galtung, 1969, p. 169). Therefore, going by this understanding, if a person dies from cholera today despite all the available medical facilities and scientific advances, it will be termed as violence. But a death occurring due to cholera in the 17th century would not be considered as violence since such deaths were not medically preventable back then. Violence need not be only physical in nature, the threat (be it real or perceived) of physical use of force can also be seen as a form of violence which is psychological. Violence can be present

even when no one is hit or hurt, and it can also be present when there is no subject (person) who acts. There seems to be no way of escaping violence in some form or the other as it connects to all social institutions and social processes. Therefore, a number of scholars have worked in their respective fields keeping the concept of violence central to their work.

However, Walter Benjamin has suggested in his work *Critique of Violence* (1996), a deconstruction of the relations between violence, law and justice. He problematizes the question of whether violence can be, in principle, a moral means to achieve a just end? But he goes on to critique violence in itself. He states that the law is founded on the basis of violence as a means and is also preserved through violence. "Violence under the name of power, i.e. domination, is the end of the law" (Benjamin, 1996, p. 248). And as Max Weber (1968) has classified power into authoritative and coercive - the authoritative power being that which is seen as legitimate and to which individuals give consent, whereas the coercive power is that which is exercised on someone without their consent and by force. The state holds authority over its citizens because it has monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force. Michel Foucault's concepts of *biopolitics* and *biopower* deal with this very aspect of the state (Foucault, 1976). Through the use of various surveillance techniques, the state ensures that individuals internalize the idea that they are being watched at every step of the way. This in turn makes the individuals monitor their own behaviour as well as that of those around them. The state, therefore, curtails individual freedom and holds power over its citizens by controlling their actions and movements which is basically the exercise of power over the bodies of the individuals. A similar case can be made of the power that 'society' exercises over the bodies of women and makes them into docile subjects.

1.4. Objectives of the Research

The concept of violence forms a central element of the narrative of certain folktales of Assam. Violence is depicted in a graphic manner in some tales or in a very subtle and symbolic manner in others. The abuse in these tales may be depicted in terms of physical or emotional violence, which is usually meted out as punishments for 'wrong deeds' or as a measure to correct 'deviant behaviour'. For example, there are often depictions of thrashing or bodily mutilation like cutting off the nose and hair of the woman who blunders, or threats of violence, humiliation and/or being socially ostracized. The violence may also be structural and in the case of these folktales the characters live in such a social setting, where both the male and female characters become victims of the social structure. Yet, in the narration of the tales the inequality faced by

the female characters is more readily visible because in most of the tales that deal with human characters, there is usually a focus on the morality of the female characters. This however, is not equally true for all the male characters. Therefore, the question arises - why is there a bias against the female characters? And why is it that most of the folktales with human characters focus on the offences by the women and very few actually show women in a positive light. What might be the reasons for the portrayal of women in these tales the way they are portrayed- as evil and prone to villainy or as champions of virtue? It is interesting to note that these characters reflect the society and yet they do not.

There are a few things that need to be considered in the context of this study. First, the study uses the word 'women' as a key concept, but 'women' is not a homogenous category. Since one's gender identity intersects with other identities like race, class, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. the notion of womanhood also entails an intersection of these various social divisions. A woman's positionality based on the intersection of a number of these identities will fashion her experiences in life. "Gender cannot be abstracted from the wider social relations with which it is enmeshed, it intersects with other social divisions and inequalities, and the meanings of masculinity and femininity vary within, as well as between, societies" (Jackson & Scott, 2002, p. 2). However, for this study, the word 'women' shall be used in the general sense of the term only, which denotes the female part of the gender binary. Second, it would be incorrect to assume that violence against women is perpetuated only by men, women can equally be perpetrators of crimes and abuse against other women. Third, the folktales selected for this research are the ones available in the written form in Assamese or English, but some or the other version of most of these stories are found in the oral traditions of the different communities of Assam. There are hundreds of tales that exist and are narrated all over Assam. But for this study, only those tales have been considered which are available in the written form and can be studied as literature as well. From among these only a few have been discussed in detail because these few stories depict the most inhuman and gory crimes against women like murder, bodily mutilation, violent thrashing, and even cannibalism. Six of these folktales are available in the compilation *Burhi Air Xadhu* (Grandmother's Tales) by Lakshminath Bezborua, first published in 1912, whereas one is from the *Kaka Deuta Aru Nati Lora* (Grandfather and Grandson)*,* which was first published in 1913. The other stories which do not depict abuse in such graphic details but in subtle forms, or show female characters in a constructive and encouraging light, have been taken from both these books as well as from two collections by Troilokyeswari Devi Baruani called *Sadhukatha* (Tales/Stories) published in

1934 and *Sandhiyar Sadhu* (Tales in the Evening) published in 1937, which have also been discussed by Sanjeev Kumar Nath (2011).

1.5. Research Questions

Based on the literature that I have read so far, the specific issues that I wish to understand through this study are as follows:

- If the folktales are a pedagogic tool, why has the depiction of violent actions against women as punishment/ means of reform not been questioned?
- Or why has it existed in an unchanging manner?
- Does it attempt to show women in a certain light which is accepted as the norm?
- Can this static part of the folktales be understood as a deliberate message for the audience (which includes children as well)?

1.6. Summary of the Research

Apart from the introductory chapter that provides a basic summary of the field of study, the literature that has informed this research, the main objectives and research questions, the following research has been divided into three chapters that deal with a specific theme each, and the concluding chapter that brings together the main findings of each of these three chapters.

The first of these three chapters deals with the social construction of the feminine identity and the notion of womanhood. It brings out the various debates around the construction of the gender binary and the embodiment of gender by individuals. It explores the manner in which women are systematically made into docile and submissive individuals for the purpose of control over their sexuality. This control may be exercised by both men and women who become agents of the structure that governs our everyday lives. Women may also face violence in various forms in their day-to-day lives, which is looked at in this section through the different approaches to explain such violence and its effects. This chapter also attempts to throw some light on the many ways in which the culture of a society reproduces ideas about gender and gender roles.

The next chapter delves into the theoretical approaches to folktales by first examining a number of literary theories about folktales, their origins and their circulation. It analyses folktales from a psychoanalytical perspective and looks at how folktales can become a medium to channelize the latent human emotions which may otherwise be unwelcome in society. This chapter also

takes a look at folktales from the perspective of feminist theorists and makes an attempt to critically analyse the gender bias in folktales. The concluding part of the chapter is a sociological understanding of the functions of folktales in society and in the lives of people as individuals.

The chapter that follows, examines the narratives of violence in a few folktales of Assam. It underlines the gender roles in these folktales and studies the portrayal of violence against women in these folktales by taking some of the most widely narrated folktales as illustrations. This chapter is followed by the concluding remarks that attempt to draw the findings of the previous chapters together and raise certain issues and questions that can be further explored.

CHAPTER 2

VIOLENCE AND THE FEMALE BODY

The construction of the gender binary and the characteristics attached to both the genders is a phenomenon that has been the subject of many scholarly works till date. However, it is worth noting that it is usually the female part of the gender binary which has to endure objectification and be discriminated against. Although men too, are subjected to the demands of the power structure in society, it is mostly the females who become victims of violence in almost every sphere of life and at every step of the way. The following chapter will be an attempt to throw some light on this matter.

2.1. Gender as Politics: The Construction of Womanhood

Gender is a social construct. It designates a hierarchy between men and women in everyday life: in social customs, social relations, social institutions etc. Many feminist scholars, social scientists and scholars working in the field of gender, sex and sexuality have argued that gender is a social construct and is quite different from the biological sex of a person. Ann Oakley used the terms 'sex' and 'gender' as two separate concepts in her book *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) by borrowing from the work of a U.S. psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Robert Stroller (1968). Oakley, following Stroller, explained that sex is the physiological and anatomical features which signify a person's biological femaleness or maleness whereas, gender is socially constructed masculinity or femininity (Oakley, 1972). Therefore, gender is not directly produced by biological sex, it is a social trait. It is important to critique and counter the 'androcentric view' of the world which tends to propagate the assumption that the difference between men and women is natural. This has been the goal of feminism, especially since its resurgence in the 1970s. However, mainstream academia had always been overpowered by knowledge production from a masculine point of view which has taken gender differences for granted. Jackson and Scott (2002) analysed some of the work of the most influential scholars in sociology which demonstrates this male dominated knowledge production. For instance, Karl Marx wrote about workers and capitalists and class distinctions in society but none of his works seem to not consider the gender of the individuals that constitute the class. Women are rendered invisible in his work. Other scholars like Friedrich Engels and Talcott Parsons took the division of labour between men and women for granted. Although Engels (2004/1884)

wrote about the gradual inequality of men and women arising due to the development of the concept of private property, he assumed that the division of labour between men and women is a natural one and did not question it. In the 1950s Talcott Parsons put forth the functionalist analysis of the family wherein he emphasised the complementary nature of the division of labour between husband and wife as something that provided stability to the family and ensured its integration into the wider society. Emile Durkheim (1960/1893) too, proposed a very functionalist explanation for the division between men and women based on what was believed to be the natural differences between the sexes. He stated that as societies progress from simple to more complex forms, the sexual division of labour between men and women becomes more and more divided and gradually the specialization extends to other functions as well. Women take care of the affective functions while men, the intellectual functions (Durkheim, 1960/1893). Max Weber highlighted the concept of patriarchy by stating that *patriarchal authority* is the oldest form of legitimate power. He concluded that the mother-child unit is a natural one which is linked to the wider society and thus, civilized by the man/father who is the head of the household and holds authority over everyone and everything within the household (Sydie, 1987).

Joan Acker (2002) has written about what she calls 'intellectual sexism' in the field of social stratification that links the social position of women to that of men. She writes that there are usually six assumptions in stratification literature about the social position of women, the first being- the family as the unit in the stratification system. This is the basis for the rest of the assumptions. Apart from this, the status of the male head of the household is used to determine the social position of a family. There is also the assumption that females live in families and so the status of the females is determined by that of the males in the family to whom she is attached. The female's status in the class structure is assumed to be equal to that of her man because the whole family is considered as a unit defined by the man's position in society. It is assumed that women determine their own social status only when they are not attached to a man. The structure of stratification system does not consider it relevant that women are not equal to men in a number of ways and are usually differentially evaluated on the basis of sex. These assumptions do not consider the fact that there could be female-headed households, households which are all-female, or husband-wife units where the man is employed part-time, is retired, unemployed or not in the workforce for any number of reasons. Moreover, it is not necessary that all women live in families or have no status resources of their own. If women have access to education, employment and income, they can definitely determine their own

status. And if this is possible for an unmarried woman, why is it considered to be inoperative as soon as she gets married? According to the functionalist understanding, occupation can be equated with a full time, functionally important social role which often indicates the social position of men (Acker, 2002, p. 91). But when we talk about women, their full-time occupation as mothers, housewives and homemakers is not considered as a ranking criterion in stratification studies. So, does it mean that this role is not a functionally important one, or that it is not a full-time activity? Or is it to be understood that only those activities which bag direct financial rewards can bestow status upon an individual or the family? Therefore, the fact that women do not get paid to do housework essentially indicates that their labour is exploited for free and taken for granted and it ensures that women do not get the deserved respect. This brings us to the argument put forth by Sylvia Walby (2002) that husbands and wives form two distinct classes, whereas men and women do not because these are gender differences. This will be further discussed in a latter section of this study.

Although gender is now understood in sociological terms as a fluid spectrum, it has been recognized as a binary for most part of the existence of the 'civilized' human society. It divides the human population into two distinct categories of males/men and females/women. While many cultures have traditionally recognized the presence of certain other gender identities and gender fluidity, the gender binary remains the most accepted form of understanding gender relations all over the world. The division of male and female is endowed with the assignment and assumption of masculine and feminine characteristics respectively, and people are expected to appear and behave according to the characteristics of their corresponding gender identity. According to Jackson and Scott (2002), "The concept of gender was adopted in order to emphasise the social construction of masculinity and femininity and the social ordering of relations between women and men" (p. 1). There is a prevalent notion that men are the stronger sex as opposed to women, who are considered to be the weaker sex in general. A number of ideas about gender which are now regarded as traditional first came into existence during the 19th century when industrial capitalism had begun. For example, the separation of the domestic space from the work space became a rigid norm. This separation was accompanied by the idea that women and men were suited for different kinds of work and that women should be relegated to the work in the domestic sphere while men worked in the public sphere (Hall, 1992).

Judith Butler in the preface of her book *Gender Trouble* raises the question: 'Does being female constitute a "natural fact" or a cultural performance or is "naturalness" constituted through

discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?' (Butler, 1990, p. viii). As Simone de Beauvoir wrote "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 2011/1949). The gender of a person is not an ascribed characteristic, rather something that a person learns and absorbs during the years of their socialization. One acquires one's gender through the process of socialization. An individual is not born as belonging to a particular gender, rather they grow into it and internalize it. "Gender is produced, negotiated and sustained at the level of everyday interaction" (Jackson & Scott, 2002, p. 1). Gender as a construction is a performative aspect of everyday lived reality. People become habituated to the performance of their gender and they internalize this performance over the course of their lives. But since it is a cultural construct, there may be variations depending on the context, and gender role performances may vary depending on the norms of the society. The whole notion of gender as a binary serves to reinforce the gender roles and expectations in society. Butler writes that it is important for feminist critiques 'to understand how the category of "women" is produced and restrained by the very structures of power though which emancipation is sought' (1990, p. 2). Therefore, she attempts to debunk *phallogocentrism* and compulsory heterosexuality as defining institutions of society. Heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality makes it difficult for the expression of gender outside the binary. The idea of the 'feminine as opposed to the masculine' the gender binary in terms of the feminine as that which is not masculine, and woman as that which is not man, stems from the assumption of compulsory heterosexuality as a norm. "There are cultural matrixes where certain identities cannot exist because the gender doesn't follow from sex and the practices of desire do not follow from either sex or gender" (Butler, 1990, p. 17).

However, in the following study, the use of the term 'women' will be in the context of the binary. It is not to state that the term 'women' is a homogeneous one. Butler raises a concern over the idea that the term 'women' denotes a common identity, and states that this assumption can pose certain political problems (Butler, 1990). One's gender identity intersects with other identities like race, class, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. Therefore, positionality i.e., where a woman is situated in terms of caste, class, race and other identities, also determines her identity as a woman and all that is ascribed to her. Womanhood as an identity marker is not free from other markers of social division such as class, caste, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, age, sex or sexuality, to name a few. It is true that the concept of 'women' can't be understood in isolation or abstraction from all the social relations with which it intersects. These divisions and intersections create different lived experiences for women based on the context.

In recent years, there has been wide criticism of the notion of a universal patriarchy, because cultural contexts of domination of women vary and cannot be clubbed as one. It is also necessary to critically evaluate the western notion of 'oppression' and construction of ideas like non-Western/orientalist culture as barbarian (Butler, 1990). The degree of involvement of women and men in everyday chores and the delegation of duties and responsibilities to either gender may vary from society to society. And so, does the degree of authority that one holds over the household and its members, or in relation to the extended kin group or the public sphere. The rules of behaviour would also vary according to the norms of the society and the control or influence exercised by different individuals will also vary accordingly. It is important to understand that it is not necessarily only men who oppress women, women can be equal perpetrators of abuse against other women. As established earlier, the category of women is not a homogeneous one, nor is the category of men. A complex intersection of various social divisions is always present in the formation of an individual's identity. Usually when the term patriarch is used, it refers to a male head of a family or household. However, under the patriarch's authority within the household or family, different members can usually be located in a hierarchy. They have different tasks to perform and have relative power over their areas of responsibility. Therefore, it is prudent to say that women may also be equal partners in perpetuating patriarchy, i.e., women and men are both subjects and objects of this system. Deniz Kandiyoti (1988)theorized that there are two forms of patriarchy prevalent in the world: one that can be seen in sub-Saharan African societies and the other, which is more geographically widespread across North Africa, the Muslim Middle-East (including Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran), and South and East Asia (specifically, India and China). She argues that "women strategize within a set of concrete constraints that reveal and define the blueprint" of what she terms as *patriarchal bargains*. "These patriarchal bargains exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275). She states that there are critical variations in kinship systems within the Indian sub-continent, but by and large the form of patriarchy prevalent in India has been termed as *classic patriarchy*. She explains that young women in the patriarchal and patrilocal set up "are subordinate not only to all the men, but also to the more senior women, especially their mother-in-law" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 278). Therefore, they try to make bargains with the patriarchal setting in certain ways. The older women try to offset their subordination to men by attaining control over younger women. They enjoy a dominant position over the younger women in the household and it results in a cyclical fluctuation of power position, which, combined with status considerations end up in active collusion of

women in the reproduction of their own subordination. Therefore, to assume that oppression of women is only carried out by men is problematic. In Veena Das's (1976) work, she writes that "the relationship between the mother-in -law and the daughter-in-law is treated as basically hostile, due to the conflict between the ties created by sexuality and procreation" (p. 212). Moreover, women may conform to certain cultural expectations not out of an inner conviction of their own inferiority but out of concern for the feelings and honour of others (especially the male members) (Raheja & Gold, 1996). The idea of 'subservient women' is entrenched in the cultural mores and women are often taught since childhood to imbibe such a demeanour as a sign of respect towards one's traditions, while men are taught to expect the same from women. The adherence to rigid gender roles, whether at the level of the individual or that of the society, can result in a higher chance of men being abusive towards women (Heise, 1998).

2.2. Sexuality and Docile Body: Disciplining Women

The concept of *biopolitics* used by Michel Foucault (1976) can be understood in very simple terms as the political rationality which takes the administration of life and populations as its subject 'to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order' (cited in Adams, 2017). In his words, biopower is "A power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (Foucault, 1976; cited in Adams, 2017). In his work *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977) he states that disciplinary power takes the body of the individual as the focus of subjectification. A diverse range of techniques may be utilized to subjugate the individual's body through which the population is controlled. This kind of power has been referred to as *biopower.* Such exercise of power is aimed at producing docile bodies, who will remain subjugated, and those in positions of power can exercise their power over them, control their behaviour and exploit them.

Friedrich Engels theorised in his work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (2004/1884)that at some point in time, before human beings settled down into the 'civilized' way of life, men and women were equal in terms of the right to choose their sexual partners. But with the evolution of the concept of private property, women's sexuality and reproductive capacity began to be controlled by men so that the men's property would be inherited by their own offspring. He also wrote that the word 'family' has its origins not in the notion of a couple and their children, but in the Roman concept of 'familia' which referred to the total number of domestic slaves owned by a man. "The expression *familia, id est patrimonium* (i.e., the

inheritance) was invented by the Romans to describe a new social organism with a head who owned wife, children and a number of slaves, under Roman paternal power, with power of life and death over them all. The transition to father right and the overthrow of mother right was the *world-historic defeat of the female sex"* (Engels, 2004/1884, p. 11).

In our patriarchal society, women are considered as the 'second sex', something lesser than men. The need to control the sexual behaviour of women emerges out of the idea of ensuring that women stay within the limits set by men. Women were seen as mere vessels for reproduction, as a property owned by men. Therefore, they are in need of domestication and their sexuality needs to be tamed. The means of control may vary from sexual, physical, verbal, emotional abuse to internalized norms and standards set by society. As Jackson and Scott write, "the world we inhabit is always already ordered by gender, yet gender is also embodied and lived …. is experienced as central to individual identities" (2002, pp. 1-2). It is also internalized by the women who play an active role in reproducing the notion of masculine control over female sexuality. Several methods may consciously or unconsciously be perpetuated by both men and women for the creation of 'docile' female bodies. For instance: rape becomes more than just the violation of a woman's rights, there are notions of honour, shame, guilt, victimhood etc, attached to rape. Young girls are brought up with the fear of rape, they are made to believe that virginity is a virtue and that they need to guard it carefully. They are taught to 'remain within the limits' set by society, and any transgression of these limits entail negative sanctions like rape (which is a form of physical coercion), among other things. There is also the idea of power assertion associated with the act of penetration during rape (also in consensual sexual intercourse, the woman is often seen as the docile, passive receiver and the man as the active partner who holds power over her).

Among most communities in India, there are very rigid gender-role expectations. Women are taught and expected to grow into individuals who are submissive to men. Any lapse of role expectations invites far greater repercussions for a woman compared to that of a man in a similar state of affairs. For instance, in Veena Das's essay titled 'Masks and Faces: An Essay on Punjabi Kinship' (1976) she throws light on the gender role expectations attached to women in such a kinship system. She highlights the dynamics that are expected and that exist between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law in an urban Hindu Punjabi household. She states that these dynamics may differ from community to community because social kinship, as opposed to biological kinship, is a social construct governed by socially constructed rules. Das writes that the character of Punjabi kinship can be understood in terms of a dialectic between

what is considered to be a 'natural' kin relationship and what can be called a 'social' kin relationship. The relationship between a mother and her children falls into the natural order of things, that which is not learnt, but comes naturally. Whereas, the relationship between spouses falls within the cultural order, which means the relationship follows certain cultural rules that legitimizes and dictates the conduct of the spouses. The 'biological facts of procreation and copulation' create primordial ties (Das V., 1976, p. 198) which may result in a friction between the two. There is the notion that "a wife is replaceable, in the sense that one woman is as good as another for the purpose of procreation, but the mother cannot be replaced" (Das V., 1976, p. 200). The mother makes 'sacrifices' during the gestation period, like abstaining from certain kinds of food, keeping her thoughts pure, keeping ritual observances, etc. in order to ensure good health and character of the unborn baby. The notion of 'sacrifice' here, essentially means that the woman's behaviour and actions are thoroughly monitored during this period. Owing to the fact that they make sacrifices and comply with such scrutiny of behaviour during their younger days, older women often expect filial piety from their adult children. The bond between the mother and child, the son(s) to be more precise, created by procreation is challenged by the bond between the son and his wife, created by the son's sexuality. There is often an implicit question of where the man's loyalty lies, in his relationship with his mother or in that with his wife. The role of the bonds of sexuality are not denied by the social norms because it is important for procreation, but such bonds are definitely relegated to the 'backstage'. The father's bond with his child(ren) is less intimate than that of the mother and hence Das doesn't address it in much detail.

"The daughter has a special place in Punjabi families, being seen as a repository of family honour" (Das V., 1976, p. 214) albeit she is believed to be 'paraaya dhan'. The daughter is not the one who is supposed to look after her parents in their old age. Once she has been married off she is supposed to look after the welfare of her marital family which is why her relationship to her own mother is not considered as much as that of her brothers. But this doesn't mean that all ties to the natal family are severed upon marriage. Since she is the daughter of the family, her sexual and social conduct is linked to the honour of her natal family as well, even after her marriage. It is believed that women are fickle by nature and have no control over their sexuality, and so they need to be controlled by stringent social norms. The girl's 'brothers' (a term used in this context to include all the male agnates of her generation) are her protectors: they will avenge any attacks on her honour. This obligation remains even after her marriage when the husband becomes the protector of the woman's honour. The 'brother' will protect her honour

even against her husband or her in-laws. The in-laws never reprimand their daughter-in-law directly for her actions, rather they do it indirectly in a subtle manner. However, if a daughter-in-law engages in serious misdemeanours, her husband or her in-laws make her parents or natal family aware of the incident and they are expected to discipline her. Das writes that "…in this sense, the girl never ceases to be a repository of honour for her parents" (Das V. , 1976, p. 220).

The antagonism between females based on such relations may be seen in the everyday interactions within the family. However, these interactions are checked closely by norms which the women are supposed to follow, in order to maintain harmony and behave in a certain manner being the custodian of the family's honour. Since both the daughter-in -law and the mother-in-law are considered to be 'daughters-in-law' of the family and not 'daughters' they share a different kind of relationship unlike the mother-daughter one. For instance, there are certain taboos around the topic of sex being discussed between a parent and child. Therefore, in order to learn about the sexual fulfilment in her daughter's married life, a woman can broach the topic with her daughter-in-law, who will directly talk to her sister-in-law and relay the information to the mother. Because of the joking relation between the brother's wife and the sister, this is an acceptable way of communicating to the mother about the consummation of the sister's marriage.

The position of women in relation to the men in the family, the extended kin group or the community itself is a matter that needs a deeper understanding. A woman is essentially understood as the responsibility of men since she is equated to other material possessions of men, and hence the woman's reproductive powers and subsequently her sexuality becomes an important aspect to be controlled by men. The control over a woman's sexuality, or its transgression essentially serves a political end since the honour of the family/community is often linked to the sexuality of their women. Moreover, any culture that endorses very rigid gender roles and ideals like *hypermasculinity* is prone to promote a very callous sexual attitude towards women. Men being abusive and violent towards women, or being dominant and aggressive, is seen as manly or proper masculine behaviour and this is true of many cultures across the world. The practices of *kanyadaan* (gift of a virgin in marriage) as opposed to marriage as a contract can also throw some light on the perception of a woman's sexuality based on cultural and religious norms. The notion of marriage as a contract seems to provide some legally recognized autonomy to the woman, in that she is required to accept the groom as her husband during the wedding ceremony against the payment of a certain amount. In such cases, usually, the woman's sexual history doesn't matter much as long as she performs her

role as a wife dutifully. On the other hand, however, when marriage is considered as a gift of a virgin by her father or kinsmen to the groom and by extension to his family, the woman doesn't really have a say in it. She is essentially exchanged like property between two groups of men, sometimes through a payment of dowry and in other cases through a payment of bride-price. In such cases the sexuality and sexual history of the woman is often a matter of scrutiny and speculation and as the phrase suggests, she is expected to be a virgin. However, regardless of the nature of the marriage, in India usually a woman's reproductive abilities are always the prime focus of this institution of marriage. Marriage can be called a socially accepted sexual union of a man and a woman to produce offspring. The woman is expected to give birth to a child as soon as possible in order to carry on her husband's lineage, preferably through sons rather than daughters. Any woman who is unable to bear a child has traditionally been looked down upon and considered as unlucky. There are certain terms in almost every Indian language which are used to refer to childless women, and these terms are demeaning and undignified in nature. Even if the childlessness may be a result of the husband's inability to procreate owing to any reason- medical or otherwise- the blame for not having an offspring always falls on the woman.

A woman is often reduced to her reproductive abilities and her domestic labour. Sylvia Walby argues in her article 'Gender, Class and Stratification' (2002) that housewives and husbands constitute two classes when the definition of class is understood in terms of a distinctive work and market position. This is unlike the gender difference between men and women which, according to Walby, should not be reduced to class. The work that housewives do is hard work but just because it doesn't get any wages in return, it should not be disqualified from the status of work. Rather as Christine Delphy (1977) points out, the focus should be on the distinctive nature of the relations of production under which the housewife labours. Regardless of the precise nature of her tasks, a housewife is involved in a relationship of unequal exchange with her husband wherein she indirectly receives maintenance in exchange for her labour. Apart from the quantity of work that a woman does within such an exchange relationship, the typical social relationship under which the work is performed is also significant. She doesn't receive a wage, her employer (husband) can't be changed as easily, and if she refuses to perform her domestic services of various sorts, she is liable to domestic abuse, and even divorce. The category of housewives is not a uniform one and may vary based on the class position of their husbands, but it is an undeniable fact that all of them are subordinate to the patriarchal relations of production in the household. Even if a woman has servants to carry out the chores, she is

still dependent on her husband for maintenance in indirect exchange of her efforts at household management. Walby (2002) argues that housewives constitute a class, but she deems it inappropriate to designate all women as a class although gender is a significant organizing principle in society. In a patriarchal society, even if a woman is employed in wage labour outside the domestic sphere, her position as a wife itself assumes that she will take part in the exchange of her labour in the domestic sphere for the status and respect she receives within the household. However, Walby clearly states that the class position that women derive from their wage labour outside the domestic sphere grants many women a dual class position, because of their engagement in two distinct sets of relations of production. Therefore, it would be a serious mistake to try to conflate the two or grant primacy to one and ignoring the other in this process.

2.3. Violence Against Women: A Political Tool

Every woman all over the world is prone to some or the other form of violent assault on their bodies or a real or perceived threat to their freedom and individuality. They are vulnerable to rape, be it within a marriage, by a relative or partner or even strangers. They may be subjected to domestic violence, human trafficking and forced prostitution, sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, child sexual abuse, female genital mutilation, or other not as obvious practices of violence that contributes to the atmosphere of threat in which all women live for the entirety of their lives like sexual harassment, stalking, threats of violence, deprivation of bodily liberty, the undernutrition of girls (Nussbaum, 2005). The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1993 defines violence against women as:

> Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual
> or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion
> or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.

Moreover, since women are often socialized to be submissive and docile, it is true that violence against women in any form frequently goes unreported because of reluctance on the part of the woman or because such incidents are not perceived as crimes, rather as a woman's misfortune. There exists little, if any, consensus on the etiology of abuse based on gender. According to Lori L. Heise, this is mainly because activists and academics alike, tend to "advance single factor theories rather than explanations that reflect the full complexity and messiness of real life" (1998, p. 262). Following the works of Crowell and Burgess (1996) and Miller (1994), Heise suggests that it is crucial to acknowledge the factors operating at multiple levels in order to have a complete understanding of gender based violence. It is true that the system of

patriarchy puts men in a position of power and privilege in society, thereby making women disadvantaged. But it does not explain why some men abuse women while others do not, nor does it explain why almost all women face violence or abuse in some form or the other during their lives. Therefore, Heise (1998) proposed the adoption of the *ecological framework* for conceptualizing the reasons behind gender-based violence. "An ecological approach to abuse conceptualizes violence as a multifaceted phenomenon grounded in an interplay among personal, situational, and sociocultural factors" (pp. 263-264). She adopted the descriptive nomenclature used by Belsky (1980) in his article on the etiology of child sexual abuse and neglect, which can be visualized as four concentric circles (Figure 1).

Personal History

o **Witnessing marital violence as a child**
o **Being abused oneself as a child**
o **Absent or rejecting father**

Microsystem

o **Male dominance in the family**
o **Male control of wealth in the family**
o **Use of alcohol**
o **Marital/verbal conflict**

Exosystem

o **Low socioeconomic status/unemployment**
o **Isolation of woman and family**
o **Delinquent peer associations**

Macrosystem

o **Male entitlement/ownership of women**
o **Masculinity linked to aggression and dominance**
o **Rigid gender roles**
o **Acceptance of interpersonal violence**
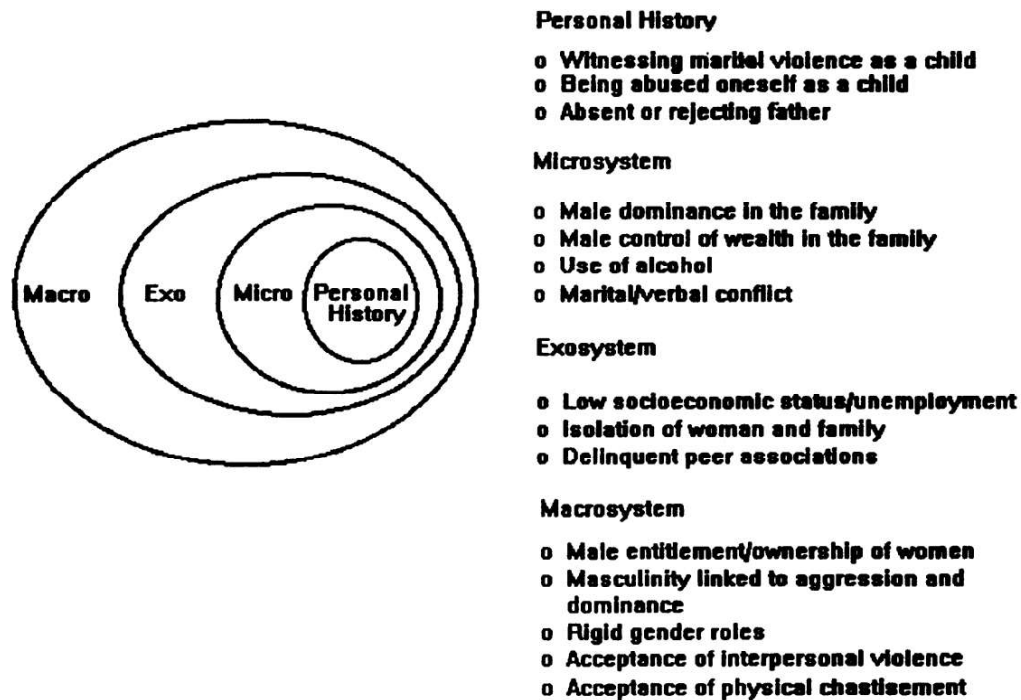o **Acceptance of physical chastisement**

Figure 1: Factors related to violence against women at different levels of the social ecology. Source: Heise (1998)

The innermost circle signifies the factor of the individual's personal history, their own personal experiences with or being witness to such violence. The next circle called micro-system, represents the immediate family and other intimate relationships within which the individual experiences or sees such violent behaviour. The third circle represents the exosystem, which includes the social structures and institutions that embed the microsystem. These could be both formal and informal like the workspace, neighbourhood, social networks, and groups with whom the individual identifies oneself. The outermost circle is the macrosystem, representing

the general views and attitudes prevalent in the culture at large (Heise, 1998). Therefore, going by this understanding, the ecological framework of violence against women provides an interesting experiential tool to understand much of the existing research and conceptualize future research. The ecological framework can help to focus better on the crucial characteristics related to gender-based abuse and help academics and activists deal with the complexities of real life while theorising.

For instance, a man raised in a patriarchal family with traditional gender roles, or one who has witnessed domestic violence as a child or had been a victim of abuse himself, or who has grown up with an absent or rejecting father, or has a delinquent peer group, is more prone to being abusive towards their partner. A relationship in which the man is clearly dominant economically and otherwise, or in which the woman has a higher educational attainment than the man, where there is alcohol consumption by the man, disagreement over division of labour among the partners, usually end up with the woman being abused by the man. Moreover, there is evidence of such abuse being more common in families with low income and by men who are unemployed. Though, this does not negate the fact that gendered violence occurs in all socio-economic backgrounds. There is also a culturally defined notion of manhood that links dominance, aggression and male honour to masculinity or 'being a man' and when faced with a situation that causes distress or threatens, a male individual in such a culture will fall back upon the learnt macho behaviour of anger and aggression. Such behaviour and responses among the men is culturally promoted and it looks down upon empathy and compassion as unmanly emotions or signs of weakness which are only to be exhibited by the feeble like women and children.

According to Ashis Nandy (2009) there is a 'homology between sexual and political dominance' which was invariably used by Western colonialism and was congruent with existing Western sexual stereotypes. "It produced a cultural consensus in which political and socio-economic dominance symbolized the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity" (p. 4). Nandy states that although this homology between sexual and political dominance was not central to the colonial culture during the early years of British colonial rule in India when the rulers mainly came from the feudal background, it became more dominant once the ruling class came to be dominated by British middle-class cultural norms.

R.E. Dobash and R. P. Dobash (1979) underlined that under the English common law:

The wife came under the control of her husband and he had the legal right to use force against her in order to ensure that she fulfilled her wifely obligations, which included the consummation of the marriage, cohabitation, maintenance of conjugal rights, sexual fidelity, and general obedience and respect for his wishes (p. 60).

Similar views about the 'ownership of wives by husbands' exist in many communities all over the world. In some communities it is validated by their religion while in certain others it is customary because the husband pays bride price at the time of marriage. The reasons for the existence of this notion of 'women as the property of men' can be many, but it is true that this practice has been a historical fact. For example, many religious texts enshrine the view of a woman as her husband's property. The Bible cautions women to obey their husbands (1 Peter 3: 1-7- Instructions to Wives and Husbands), as does the *Skandapurana,* a sacred Hindu text which instructs women on how to be a good and dutiful wife. According to Tim Marshall, the *Skandapurana* instructs wives to "take her meals after her husband, sleep after he sleeps, not to lose her temper if he assaults her or not to look at her husband angrily, and never to sit in an elevated place" (1995, p. 94). In the USA, it was only in 1871 that a court in Alabama passed a judgement making the state of Alabama the first in the USA to overturn a husband's right to beat his wife (Heise, 1998). In India, although there are legal provisions in place to curb wife beating and other forms of domestic violence, it is still a prevalent practice. An article on *The Print* states that "data from the National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-2016) released on 12 January 2018 said that while 52 per cent of women surveyed believe it is reasonable for a husband to beat his wife, only 42 per cent of men agree with it" (Menon V. , 2018). It further stated that attitudes among both men and women has not changed much since the last survey taken in 2005- 06, except for the fact that the number of men who believe that domestic violence against women is okay, is now lower than the number of women who think the same way. Marital rape is still not considered a crime in India and is not punishable by law. Torture, abuse and killing of women in connection to dowry is also a reality in India, although there are legal measures in place to curb such violence. Moreover, as Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen (2002) have pointed out, in India, violence against females begin even before birth. The sex ratio in India has been unbalanced for quite some time now, and it is an important indicator of unequal access to nutrition and healthcare to girls and women, and widespread cases of female foeticide and infanticide, especially in the northern and western states of the country.

Galtung (1969) has argued that violence can be present even when there is nobody committing direct violence. He calls it truncated violence but it is highly meaningful. The type of violence

where there is an actor who commits violence is referred to as *personal* or *direct* and that type of violence where there is no such actor as *structural* or *indirect* violence. In both these types of violence there will be people who are hurt or hit, or who have been manipulated, but these consequences can be traced back to concrete persons or actors in the first case only. In the second case, however, there may not be any person who directly harms another in the structure, rather, the violence is built into the structure and surfaces as unequal power and as a result, as unequal life chances. It points to the form of violence which is present in unequal distribution of power, unequal distributions of resources, and unequal access to healthcare, nutrition, education, job opportunities, or the opportunity to realise one's potential and even unequal access to public spaces for that matter. In India, almost every woman and young girl suffer from such structural violence. This type of violence is not easily visible since it is built into the structure. Therefore, when a husband resorts to wife-beating, it is a clear case of physical violence, but structural violence can be seen when, for example, a general attitude towards wife-beating as an acceptable practice exists among a large section of the population. Structural violence can also be referred to as *social injustice* (Galtung, 1969). It can be as major a hindrance to women's capabilities as direct physical or psychological abuse.

Nussbaum (2005) writes that violence, in any form, impacts women's capabilities which may range from their life and chances of making something out of it, to their health and bodily integrity, their imagination, thoughts and senses, their emotions, chances at forming affiliations, their relationship to the nature and control over environment, etc. Women are subjected to abuse for all sorts of reasons which may be considered as disobedience of the rules set for them. They may also be abused because they become hostages in the clash between male egos and their sense of entitlement and power. Many women are murdered in the course of sexual violence and this particularly happens in large numbers during wartime and communal conflicts. Deniz Kandiyoti also wrote that there is an overlap of the sexuality of women, nationalism and honour (cited in Menon & Bhasin, 1998). Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin write that "Women occupy a special place - and space - in such enactments of violence" (1998, p. 40) Since women's bodies are seen as the property of the men of the community, and the notion of women as the repository of honour of the community is prevalent, sexual violence against women of the 'other' community during wars and communal conflicts is seen as the ultimate attack on the men of the 'other' community. Women become objects in the male construction of their own honour and the sexuality of women is symbolic of the 'manhood', the sacrilege of which is a matter of great dishonour and shame and needs to be avenged

(Menon & Bhasin, 1998). This notion of honour of the family or community residing in the body of the woman and the idea that the bodies of women of the 'other' community were territories that needed to be conquered or marked, was also one of the biggest causes of violence against women, sexual and otherwise, during the partition of India. Similar cases were seen on a large scale during the Bangladesh War of Freedom as well and in recent years in many other countries including Rwanda, Bosnia, Sierra Leone, and Columbia, to name a few (Nussbaum, 2005). Another striking fact is that men, when faced with such a situation are often more than willing to kill their own women to protect their honour, rather than let the 'other' malign it. For instance, Menon and Bhasin noted in their work on partition related violence that the male survivors of partition often recount with pride how they killed their own women in order to save their honour as well as that of the family (1998).

Rape of women or being coercive with women is often associated with a macho personality and is often endorsed as desirable and appropriate for men (Heise, 1998). Mosher and Tomkins (1988) wrote that the idea of hypermasculinity engrained through socialization results in the recognition of masculinity as being violent, unfeeling, sexually aggressive and tough. A study conducted by Stith and Farley (1994) showed that the cultural approval of marital violence combined with low SRE score (indicating traditional and rigid gender-role attitudes) were the strongest predictors of severe wife abuse. This is supported by the results of a six-culture analysis by Whiting and Edwards (1973) which found that when traditional gender-based task assignments are changed, both boys and girls show significant reduction in gender differences. Boys displayed less aggressive behaviour while girls displayed more confidence. In India, rape is now legally understood as a crime against humanity and has been cited in the Indian Constitution as a violation of the fundamental right to life with dignity.

Women may often be at risk of abuse by their own people and live in perpetual fear of making mistakes, which impedes them from effective participation in everyday activities and enjoying their lives to the extent possible. They may be subjected to punishments by members of their own family or community for deviating from the set of rules fixed for them. For example, engaging in sexual relations with members of other communities is seen as stepping out of line. The transgression of boundaries by women are often punished in order to make an example for others and warn them against any such transgressions. It is aimed at the embodiment of the structure and the notion of 'honour' by women. In recent years, most cases of honour killings have surfaced in the states of Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan and it throws a light on the complex nexus of caste or religion-based identity politics, patriarchal norms, the exercise of

power and the need to control a woman's sexuality. The study of Punjabi kinship by Veena Das (1976) throws light on the notion of 'honour' of the family and how the daughter of the household is the repository of the family's honour. Her brothers are meant to defend her honour, even if by making sacrifices themselves. But if the daughter engages in 'dishonourable conduct' which can "ruin the honour of the family forever, it is the duty of the father to kill an errant daughter rather than allow her to smear the good name of the family" (Das V. , 1976, p. 214). There are instances in this form of kinship system and the notion of honour associated with it, which leads people to severing all ties with the erring party, or in extreme cases making the 'ultimate sacrifice' i.e., killing their own daughters in order to 'protect' the family's honour. Women's bodies are seen as objects that can be polluted or cleansed, and a symbolic meaning is attached to the womb and breasts that nurture future generations (Menon & Bhasin, 1998). Crimes against women can also be seen in terms of crimes of passion. The most widespread form of this crime in recent years is acid-attacks on women by jilted lovers. This again points to ideas of hypermasculinity that shape the mentality of men who deem it acceptable to take revenge upon a woman who does not accept their romantic or sexual advances.

Feminist critiques of science have also questioned the violence meted out to women in the name of ending superstitions like witchcraft through witch-hunting incidents in medieval Europe. Deriving from the work of Walter Benjamin (1996), we can consider that violence is a means to an end and not an end in itself. It is interesting to note that violence in the form of witch-hunting could have been used as a means to a different end altogether around 1857-58 by the *adivasis* of the Chhotanagpur region in central India. Shashank Sinha (2007) has argued that in 1857-58 the tribal communities of Chhotanagpur took to witch-hunting as a mark of protest against the British. The British administration had banned witch-killing prior to 1857 by passing laws against this inhuman practice. The belief in witches (*dains/churails*) or spirits (*bongas*) occupied a vital place in the adivasi cosmology and economy. For them, killing a witch was an act of social service by removing a malevolent creature from the world who could harm all the living beings. Therefore, they did not consider it as murder of a fellow human. They believed that wicked spirits and witches were flourishing under the British rule which banned the killing of witches. According to Sinha, the tribals arranged programmes of witch-hunting as a mode of resistance against the British, which was not direct and yet was sanctioned by the community. However, this argument has been critiqued by Ata Mallick (2008) who states that it is not accurate to accept the declaration of the witch-hunters of that period that they were motivated only by communitarian religious concerns. Mallick opines that it is

essential to consider other motivations like personal enmity that may have resulted in the witch-hunts during this period. It is true that the adivasi societies are marked by a greater degree of communal solidarity, but it would be incorrect to assume that every member of the community consented to those killings. Such a stance will disregard the victims and their families, who were a minority and whose voices have been silenced. People often do not accept accusations of witchcraft easily if they are being made against members of their own family or kin group. Those who are accused of being witches or sorcerers are considered to be a social threat in general and these traditional beliefs are deep-seated in the tribal folklore. As Christina Larner (1981) has insisted in her work in the context of the witch-hunts in Scotland between 16th to 18th century, the witch-hunters believed that they were hunting people who have sold their souls to the Devil and did not consider the victims of these hunts as women. The fact that witches are feared as mysterious powerful beings who draw power from the negative spirits wandering the earth and can cause harm to any living creature, directly or indirectly, makes people hunt and kill anyone who is suspected of interacting or associating with spirits. It is possible that certain members of a community may misuse this fear prevalent among fellow members to settle personal enmity with a particular individual or family by accusing them of witchcraft.

Cases of witch-hunting can also be understood in the light of disobedience or breaking of societal norms. When a woman dares to move beyond the limits set by the society or not adhere to certain rules, or deviate from the norms, she may be branded as a witch and subjected to punishment. The branding of a woman as a witch can also be used as a means to extract revenge against a woman in a society where such superstitions are prevalent. "Witchcraft was part of a broader pattern of moral offences for which women were given increased criminal responsibility at the Reformation in Europe" (Goodare, 1998, p. 294). The majority of these moral offences were related to a woman's sexual life and sexuality and included adultery, fornication, incest and prostitution, along with the offence of being argumentative. The accusation of witchcraft was also related to sex, i.e. a woman accused of being a witch was believed to have made a pact with the Devil and he had sex with her. It is quite clear from this list of offences that the practice of witch-hunting had more to do with the class of clergymen attempting to tame a woman's sexuality with a basis in religious notions of morality. Those cases wherein the accusers were also women, can be understood in terms of conformist behaviour on the part of the accuser, or the will to assert their own respectability in society by accusing other women of transgression of societal norms. Moreover, women would often

censor their own behaviour in order to save themselves from accusations of witchcraft. Witch-hunting, in this sense, was a powerful tool to pressure women into conformity during the Reformation.

Among many communities across the world and specifically in Africa and Asia, branding people as witches and sorcerers, and blaming them for misfortunes or accidents is a common practice even today. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) has reported that following accusations of witchcraft, 768 women have been murdered in India in the period 2008-11 (2011). Statistics indicating a high rate of such crimes in Assam makes this practice a serious social and legal concern in the state. Over the past few years, many such cases have come into focus and although a number of efforts have been made to create awareness about the superstitious and unfounded nature of these allegations against people (of which the majority are women), many women and men (comparatively lower numbers than women) have lost their lives to the practice of witch-hunting in Assam. In a report published in the *Journal of North East India Studies*, the number of witch-hunting cases in Assam alone was found to be more than 65 in the period between 2007-2012 (Chakraborty & Borah, 2013). Apart from the murders that get reported, there are many more cases which go unreported or which may include forms of violence other than murder such as ostracization and dislocation from their home, community or village, humiliation in public, thrashing, etc. which leave a deep psychological impact, isolation and a fear for their lives among the victims (PLD, AMSS, & NEN, 2014). The cases of witch hunting in the state of Assam have been noted mostly among the tribal communities in the state who reside in remote, underdeveloped rural areas where the majority of the population is illiterate and poor and believe in superstitions. Many of the accusations of witchcraft are motivated by personal enmity such as property disputes or because a woman refutes the sexual advances of a man. Since most of the women accused of witchcraft are elderly or middle-aged women who often have knowledge of traditional medicines and healing practices, they may also be framed by male *ojhas,* who view these women as threats to their own business, working together with others who hold a personal grudge against these women. The instigators and perpetrators may also include women who are not strangers to the victims. There are general beliefs among the communities where such cases occur most often, that the 'witches' acquire evil powers by practising certain kinds of rituals, chanting specific mantras, worshipping certain trees or stones, performing particular types of dances under big trees, and performing secret puja on a new moon night, etc. There are also beliefs that 'witches' can cause drought and disease, death of children and livestock

by cursing them, have powers to shapeshift, etc, which are not limited to Assam only but are more widespread. In 2015, the Assam Assembly passed *The Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Act/Bill*. But the Bill has reportedly been referred back by the Ministry of Home Affairs for review (Acharyya, 2017). This bill mandates a jail term of between three and seven years for branding any person a witch, which may be extended to life imprisonment if the person is driven to commit suicide as a result of being labelled a witch (Iyengar, 2015). However, there is also the need to overcome the legal vacuum related to healing and recovery, rehabilitation and security of the victims from any future recurrence and this needs the cooperation and participation of women groups, students' organizations, health workers, and other civil society organisations. The Project Prohori introduced by Kula Saikia is one such initiative which has seen positive results in the years since its inception (Acharyya, 2017).

2.4. Cultural Reproductions

In Radhika Coomaraswamy's (2002) view, many of the violent cultural practices against women have their roots in the idea of control over female sexuality and a woman's emotional life, because in some societies the expression of a woman's emotions and sexuality are considered as serious threat to the social order and a challenge to the integrity of the social fabric. Gender is reproduced culturally through a number of media. Literature and popular culture, television and cinema, folk art forms, myths and legends, all contribute to the reproduction of gender in a society. Gender roles and expectations related to those roles are reiterated in everyday lived experiences of people through these media. For instance, if we take the medium of print- books, novels, magazines, newspapers- have been one of the most popular medium of assertion and reiteration and in some capacity, questioning of gender roles. With the popularity of the printing press in Europe during the Renaissance, for instance, the written word, or in this case the printed word became increasingly accessible to the masses and it no longer remained the monopoly of the elites only. A sharp increase in literacy owing to the relatively unobstructed flow of information and ideas, coupled with the technological revolution led to changes in class structure of the society. Gender too became a point of focus, as the process of reading changed from public oral readings to silent, private reading. Women from different backgrounds could access the printed materials and more and more women could now read as well as write in the privacy of their homes or read and discuss in informal gatherings. For example, it led to the formation of the Blue Stockings Society in England in the mid-18th century, which was an informal women's social and educational movement.

However, gender constructed in conjunction with class and race during this period gave rise to contrasting expressions of gender and gender roles (Frohn, 2016). While there was a rise of the print in vernacular languages and the ideas of the nation and nationalism spread with the phenomenon called 'print capitalism' (Anderson, 1991), some authors were more inclined towards writing for the purpose of entertainment. These serial novels or magazines, mainly fiction aimed at the working-class readership and the young, were printed on low quality paper, were cheap and became hugely popular by the name of penny magazines, penny romances or penny dreadful. Martyn Lyons (1999) writes that the novel was not regarded as a respectable artform in the 18th century, but by the first quarter of the 19th century, it became the classic literary expression of the bourgeoise society. The 19th century also witnessed the growth of the flourishing female magazine industry, cheap popular novels and cookery books. These cookery books in particular, acted as manuals for women to ensure proper decorum during meal-time, included recipes, advice on entertaining and helped in the creation of a distinct bourgeoise code of behaviour and gestures. Therefore, books like these reinforced the role of women as home-makers and linked their knowledge and attitude to the representation of their class. They acted like codes of conduct that would distinguish a 'proper lady' who can manage her domestic servants, from her working-class counterpart. Women's magazines also included recipes, advice on fashion and etiquette, and the like, and romantic fiction novels which were the opposite of practical and instructive literature or newspapers (which were reserved for the men), reinforced the idea of women as creatures with limited intellectual capacity who needed light trivial reading for the purpose of amusement only to fill their free time at home. This was especially aimed at the upper-class women. There was also the occasional journal aimed at feminist causes, but they mostly went unnoticed. The novel, however, was also seen as a danger to the minds of young and innocent girls, because it could stimulate imagination and erotic passion which could be a threat to the chastity of young women. The general attitude of working class women towards reading was that it was a waste of time from more productive domestic chores and the occasional rebellious woman who wanted to read would have to face a lot of obstacles. The middle or lower-middle class women, on the other hand, did not face such difficulties very often, but since they couldn't afford to buy books very often, they would borrow books from public lending libraries. Lyons (1999) states that because of their reading habits, the female reader of the nineteenth century can be regarded as the pioneer of modern notions of privacy and intimacy.

Apart from Europe, by the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, a number of books and periodicals about or oriented toward women became increasingly popular in the Ottoman Empire too. Irvin Cemil Schick (2011) writes that these printed materials focused on a wide range of issues from women's rights, work and employment, women's sexuality and health issues to family and housekeeping tips. However, the publications about women's sexuality and relationships emphasised upon monogamy and companionate marriage as desirable and looked down upon polygamous and arranged marriages, which overturned the traditional notions about marriage. These books and periodicals were aimed at empowering the woman as a sexual being by overthrowing the traditional notions of women's sexuality. In the backdrop of war, political and economic instability, print capitalism in the late Ottoman empire brought about new ideas about gender relations and sexuality. Many publications all over the world questioned the gender binary, gender roles in everyday life and gender-based power relations. Celine Frohn (2016) examines two penny romances: *Ela, the Outcast* and *Ada, the Betrayed* both of which contain certain motifs that attempt to subvert the dominant discourses of the period. In India, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's feminist utopian story *Sultana's Dream,* first published in 1905, was one such work written by a woman which reimagined the world with an inversion of traditional gender roles.

However, the medium of print was not as popular in questioning or rethinking gender roles and relations as it was in reinforcing them in multiple ways. Tanika Sarkar (1987)writes that during the freedom struggle in India, the nation was reimagined in the image of a woman, as a mother and the concept of 'Bharat Mata'- the country as the motherland- became a defining feature of India's struggle for independence. The country was conceptualized as a chaste woman, the mother who is a glorious figure of abundance, peace and benevolence, but who has been plundered by the British. Such an imagery was created through Bengali literature of the 19th century and through the popular painting by Abanindranath Tagore that depicts the nation as a fragile woman in need of protection. It was aimed at arousing the patriots- the sons of the motherland- to avenge her and protect her honour. Although the country was reimagined as a woman who had the capacity of Goddess Kali to destroy evil and transcend death, as well as that of Goddess Durga, to heal and replenish, it was ultimately the 'sons' who are supposed to avenge her. The women in society were encouraged to become the 'ideal patriotic woman' described in the patriotic novels, who renounces formal (western) education in favour of traditional knowledge and boycotts foreign goods and fashion. The literature of this period promoted the traditional ideologies and practices as a domain unpolluted by the foreign rule,

an independent space, the purity of which needs to be preserved and the woman is supposed to preserve this sanctity of the traditional Indian household and thereby, remain relegated to the domestic sphere. Ashis Nandy (2009) also writes that the notion of Indian masculinity underwent reformulations during the colonial period to incorporate the more virile and hypermasculine qualities of mythological personalities like Ravana, during the colonial period, but as interpreted by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, returned to the traditional notion of the more androgynous, philosophically sensitive, practical yet righteous masculinity of lord Krishna.

Certain stereotypical imagery of gender roles is also visible in advertisements on billboards and hoardings, in magazines and newspapers, on television and radio and in contemporary times, on the internet as well. For instance, a number of advertisements for things ranging from items of clothing, bathing soap, aftershave lotion to daily use household items like coffee, beer, kitchen equipment, etc reiterate very patriarchal ideas of gender roles by associating these ideas to their brand name and the apparent quality of their product.[1] These advertisements tend to normalize abuse of women in the form of domestic violence and rape and portray women as less intelligent and frivolous creatures. The articles published in magazines targeted at a female readership usually focus on the various traditional roles that women are supposed to be playing and hardly talk about women's rights, health issues, or women's financial independence. For example, in 1955 an American women's magazine called *Housekeeping Monthly* published an article entitled 'The Good Wife's Guide' in its May issue, where it outlined in detail all the ways that a woman, being a wife, should act and how best she can be a partner to her husband and a mother to her children (Chang, 2018). The article outlined such points for a woman which makes it seem like she is meant to live only to serve her husband and make his life easier and not bother about her own needs or comfort. Articles such as this tended to make it look desirable for women to be relegated to the household chores and to look after the comfort and happiness of her husband and children while putting aside her own needs. It presented women as second-class citizens who deserved less than men and who were supposed to be controlled by men, all the while presenting these ideas as the most acceptable ones. Moreover, women's magazines till date tend to focus on subjects like housekeeping, cooking tips, fashion and beauty, sex, motherhood, entertainment etc, but hardly focus on issues of women's employment, finance management or education.

---

[1] Refer to Appendix I for some examples of such advertisements.

Apart from advertisements, the portrayal of women in films and television, and other media of popular culture also present a very patriarchal and sexist outlook. For instance, Laura Mulvey (1999) has written about the portrayal of women as objects of desire in Hollywood films/cinema. She writes about the visual pleasure of voyeurism that the audience gets by looking at the images on the screen and she states that the women on screen are the objects of this pleasure whereas the men are the bearer of the look. She terms this as *scopophilia* – the pleasure gained by looking at another person as an object of erotic desire- and the look as 'the male gaze'. She states that the male who is the bearer of the look is the active 'gazer' whereas the female is the passive 'receiver' of the gaze. The cinematic codes create a gaze, a world and an object by controlling the dimensions of time and space through the editing, the narrative and the like. Mulvey also writes that there are three different looks associated with cinema – first is that of the camera which captures the scene in a particular way, second is that of the audience who watch the final product on the screen and third is that of the characters on screen who look at each other and the aim of cinema is to provide this third look to the audience so that they can realise themselves as part of the scene playing on the screen and view the characters as their own surrogate. This kind of representation of the male and the female reinforces the ideas of phallocentric masculinity that regards the man as the active doer and the woman as the passive receiver in a sexual relationship. The act of penetration is therefore, seen as a male power over the female and the female is stripped of her agency in such an understanding. Various phrases and innuendos in our everyday language such as 'popping the cherry', 'deflowering', 'losing one's virginity' etc, refer to this phallocentric masculinity. Since these colloquial phrases have a shared meaning for both men and women in a society, women too, accept their virginity as a virtue and it is seen as something that needs to be carefully guarded until the correct time has come for the woman to be 'deflowered'. Moreover, as Sudhir Kakar (1990) writes in the context of Bollywood films, these films act as substitutes for reality and as a channel to release the repressed desires of individuals. Therefore, the numerous scenes in Hindi films that depict rape of women are to be understood as 'fantasy rape' that doesn't involve any of the violence or trauma of the real-life incidents but allows the audience to indulge in the "sadomasochistic fantasy incorporated in the defencelessness and pain of a fear-stricken woman" (Kakar, 1990 , p. 34). This fear of rape is, however, internalized by the female viewers who are socialized to value their virginity as an asset. Patricia Uberoi (2006) has also worked on the representation of femininity and masculinity in Indian popular culture, namely Bollywood films, i.e. commercial Hindi cinema, calendar art and magazine romance fiction, among a host of other things. She too writes about the contradictions and moral dilemmas faced by the Indian man

and woman between the expression of their desire and romance on one hand and the moral coded norms of Indian family life on the other. She states that the lines between the elite and popular culture often get blurred and the social ethics of people and their individual autonomy over their own sexuality often intermingles in the sphere of popular culture. She writes about the 'gaze' in visual culture in terms of "Foucault's theory of the controlling power exercised through the modern instruments of surveillance" (Uberoi, 2006, p. 13), as well as in the sense of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis where there is "the erotic compulsion to look (the scopophilic instinct) and its inverse, the pleasurable desire to be seen" (Uberoi, 2006, p. 13). She notes that there also exists a genre of both folk and the mass culture which is produced by women targeted at a largely female audience such as TV soap operas and romance fiction, as well as certain expressive and performative folk genres. There also exists a 'resistance' literature within the popular or dominant discourse of culture which plays an important role in challenging the patriarchal notions of culture. If we consider the genre of folk art forms and the position of women, one of the most well-known works in this field has been carried out by Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzin Gold (1996). Based on their work in select parts on northern India, they have emphasised that through certain genres of the folk, like certain folk songs sung by women on specific social occasions and gatherings, there is an assertion of gender in a particular manner, which may be seen as empowering for the women. For instance, women sing about their woes in the marital home, which almost every woman has experienced and can relate to and the act of singing together in a public gathering allows them to voice their concerns which they can't do otherwise. These folk songs can be seen as socially accepted modes of registering their remonstration.

A vast body of literature can also be found on the cultural representation of women on the various General Entertainment Channels on television since the 1990s mainly through the serialised dramas, that tend to represent women in a very domesticated, subordinated role as compared to men. Most of these shows present the typical north-Indian family and the kind of patriarchal setting that has been referred to as 'classic patriarchy' by Deniz Kandiyoti (1988). Moreover, the representation of women in many folktales and fairy-tales, myths and legends also enshrine the fact that women are subjected to different kinds of violence for transgression of societal boundaries. In the mythologies and epics of India, namely the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* there are many instances that highlight that a woman should remain in her position as dictated by the society, otherwise she has to face the consequences of her actions. Although similar accounts are true for male characters as well, the focus on female character's purity and

virtue is far more than that of the male counterparts. In recent years there have been a number of feminist reinterpretations of these epics and their portrayal of women. For example, in the episode of *sita-haran* in the *Ramayana*, Sita is the victim of kidnaping and forced imprisonment, but when she is rescued after the battle of Lanka, her own husband makes her prove her purity by going through *agni-pariksha*. There is also the notion of the *Lakshman-rekha* which is emphasised in terms of boundary maintenance for women even in contemporary society. Moreover, in the *Mahabharata* the episode of Draupadi's *cheer-haran* takes place because of the notion of honour of the men – her husbands, the Pandavas- being attached to the sexuality of 'their woman' and how the attack on the woman's modesty is an attack on the men actually. In this case the woman's body becomes the bearer of the men's honour and pride. Being unable to save their wife's modesty in public is literally presented as the ultimate loss for the Pandavas. Episodes such as these normalise the violence and abuse perpetrated on women and in turn make them into epitomes of sacrifice and virtue which is presented as desirable. Women are expected to imbibe the characteristics of the 'virtuous and pure' Sita or make sacrifices for their men-folk as Draupadi did.

Cultural reproduction of gender also becomes prominent in the folk beliefs and customs. For instance, in the legend of *Beula-Lakhindhar* in Assam, Beula is evoked as such a pious and devoted wife, that the *Devatas* (gods) were moved by her devotion and she was able to bring her dead husband (Lakhindhar) back to life. Another legend in Assam, talks about two women, Radha and Rukmini who were considered to be so pious and fearless that during the Moamoriya rebellion, when the enemy shot at these two rebels, even the bullets couldn't pierce their *anchal*. There is also the story of *Sati* Jaimati, a historical figure who was tortured and killed by the enemy king, but she didn't give up the whereabouts of her husband, Gadapani, the king of the land. She is revered as the epitome of sacrifice in Assamese popular culture and narratives. These cultural narratives highlight sacrifice and perseverance as desirable qualities in a woman. However, there is another narrative of the fierce form of the female too. In certain parts of India and especially in Assam, diseases like chicken pox and measles are attributed to the displeasure of Shitola *aai* (mother/goddess) a particular local deity/ goddess who can cause sickness and death. There are elaborate rituals, hymns, proscriptions and prescriptions to appease the deity and prevent a breakout or for quick recovery if someone has already been inflicted. There are also practices of *Deudhoni nritya* in temples of the *Kesaikhaiti goxani*. The woman is supposed to be possessed by the deity, which is referred to as *deu-lambha/ devi-lambha*, and in this trance the woman becomes an oracle. Although the female form is worshipped in many ways in the

Assamese society, mainly by Hindus or practitioners of tribal religions, and the worship of Goddess Kamakhya with the annual *Ambubachi mela* marking the period of menstruation of the goddess, as the ultimate form of respect towards the feminine; there also exists the complete opposite practice of restriction on entry of women to the Barpeta *kirtanghar*. There are numerous representations of women in folklore, in both the benevolent and the fierce forms. Although the norms in the society propose the worship and reverence of both the benevolent and the fierce forms of the female, in everyday life the woman is expected to embody only the compassionate and virtuous aspects. The notion of an 'ideal woman' often focuses on her capacity to self-sacrifice and tolerate rather than her aggression and women in general are expected to embody the virtuous aspects and be docile individuals.

CHAPTER 3

A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF FOLKTALES

The term *folklore* usually comes across as an umbrella term that includes stories, song and dance, riddles, attire, handicrafts, knowledge of healing plants, festivals, and a lot more things. This term was coined in 1846 by the British antiquarian William Thoms, but different folklore materials had been under scholarly research since long before. The coining of the term, however, resulted in two important consequences: first, the establishment of an academic discipline called folklore (or folkloristics) in different parts of the world and second, a long-standing debate emerged about the definition and content of this new field of study (Handoo, 1985). Similar data was being studied by scholars in literary studies and cultural studies as well. Therefore, as Regina F. Bendix and Galit Hasan-Rokem (2012) state "the field of folklore research unfolds as a multifaceted array of learning, best understood when many views, perspectives and experiences are combined" (p. 1). Every human society traditionally has some or the other form of folklore as a vital part of their existence. The folklore of a community acts as a rich and authentic source of the values, customs and norms of the society that they belong to. They can act as a guide to what is acceptable and desirable and what is not acceptable or not desirable in a particular society. Although folklore subsumes a vast body of oral literature[2], music, dance, art and craft, festivals and the like, this study focuses on the oral literature part of folklore, and folktales to be precise.

3.1. Literary Approaches to Folktales

William Bascom (1965) proposes the term *prose narratives* to denote that category of verbal art which includes myths, legends and folktales. Myths and legends as part of folklore share certain similarities to folktales and many scholars have argued that these categories need not be isolated from each other. Claude Levi-Strauss considered tales as miniature myths and stressed that the tales in one society might be found in the myths of another and vice-versa, due to their similarities in characters and motifs (Chowdhury, 1985). However, some folklorists have made attempts to lay down a basic difference between the different types of stories that

---

[2] Oral literature called verbal art or expressive literature are spoken, sung and voiced forms of traditional utterances. The major forms of the oral narrative genre are myth, fairy tale, romantic tale or novella, religious tale, folktale, legend, animal tale, anecdote, joke, numskull tale, etc.

are denoted by terms like folktales, myths, legends, contemporary legends etc. Bascom (1965) states that 'myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past'. The term myth, according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary (2018), is used to refer to 'a usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon'. They are usually not about humans, but about deities, the supernatural and mysterious, about animals or culture heroes, and are considered to be sacred and accepted on belief. They usually have a religious aspect to them. Creation myths or origin stories are the most popular myths across different societies. Legends, however, are prose narratives which, like myths, are regarded as true by the narrator and his audience, but they are set in a period considered less remote, when the world was much as it is today (Bascom, 1965). Legends tend to be more secular in nature than sacred, and principally have human characters rather than deities and animals. They are usually stories about the deeds of past heroes and kings, war and victory, and so on, but could also include stories about buried treasures, ghosts and fairies etc. In recent years, contemporary legends have also surfaced as a form of prose narrative. They are a kind of tale which have no verifiable point of origin, just like in traditional legends and consist of fictional accounts. These tales are often presented as true with macabre or humorous elements, often rooted in local popular culture. They may serve the purpose of entertainment or as explanations for random events in the recent past like disappearances and strange occurrences. Folktales, on the other hand, are "prose narratives which are regarded as fiction. They are not considered as dogma or history and they may or may not have happened" (Bascom, 1965, p. 4). They are not considered to be sacred and are timeless and placeless in the sense that they may be set in any time and/or place. Folktales are usually meant for amusement but they may also serve the function of disseminating moral values. They may be classified into a number of sub-types like human tales, animal tales, moral tales (or fables), trickster tales, dilemma tales, tall tales, formulistic tales etc. The distinction made between myths, legends and folktales are as mere analytical concepts employed by scholars of European folklore that can be meaningfully applied cross culturally for ease of comparison and analysis and there may be other such categories of prose narratives.

Folktales, myths and legends as a field of enquiry have been of interest not only to folklorists, but also cultural anthropologists, psychologists, feminist scholars and sociologists to name a few. Academic folklorists focused on the collection of folklore material and the theoretical

concerns about classification, origin and distribution of folklore. The structure and functions of folktales, myths and legends have been widely studied over the years. Vladimir Propp (2009) is one of the most well-known scholars to have theorized about folktales. His work was influenced by Russian Formalism, which stressed the importance of form and technique over content. Based on his study of Russian folktales, he theorized that these folktales essentially have a number of underlying *narrative functions* which occur in a fixed sequence in all the tales (Propp, 2009). He identified thirty-one *functions* or the simplest irreducible narrative elements of folktales which would remain the same irrespective of the content of the tale. His theory examined the structure or the morphology of the folktales. According to Propp, the 'dramatis personae', the attributes and characters are variables, whereas the actions and functions of the characters are constant. The basic structure is hence, seen as the most important and the rest of the folktale is just an embellishment which is not seen as equally important. The structure or the form of the tale, in this sense transcends the limits of time and becomes a timeless entity which can be developed into a folktale at any point of time by introducing the content or the characters and their attributes. Claude Levi-Strauss (1969) is another theorist who has worked in the field of folklore, more specifically on the Bororo myths or origin stories. His theories are also structuralist in nature and they present a sort of binary relationship between nature and culture. According to him, the form is distinct from the content but the content can never be formless because the content is a variable that needs the virtual form to actualize itself. The form is in the realm of nature and the content lies in the realm of culture. Levi-Strauss critiqued Propp's theory by stating that the embellishments or the content is equally important in a myth. He states that the scheme proposed by Propp is outside the universe of the myths and has no relation to the culture or the society. The form is thus represented by Propp, that it remains changeless, regardless of the time or space, which according to Levi-Strauss is not correct. Putting anything into this framework would not always be meaningful. The reality or the context, from which the contents come, is ignored by Propp, but it should be carefully considered. Therefore, Levi-Strauss argued that a cultural reference is always necessary and the form can't be independent of it. Another theory of folktales referred to as the *stemma* model, postulates inertia as the source of stability. The advocates of this model thought that the narrator tends to maintain the tales as they heard them out of lack of imagination or because of respect for tradition. This theory tends to overstress similarities and undervalue differences in the traditional prose tales (Goldberg, 1986). This approach has been critiqued in the recent years, as has been the structuralist theories, for this very inclination towards overstressing similarities and undervaluing differences. Moreover, the critique of

structuralist theories (like the one proposed by Propp) highlights the fact that the stretching or interpretation of any tale to fit any model can result in a distorted description. A number of studies have been carried out in the last few years to concentrate on one or a few tale types and by taking into consideration the actual variants, in order to derive a model that is tailored to fit but have arrived at the conclusion that all tales are not really identical (Goldberg, 1986, p. 166). Elaborating on Thompson's concept of *motifs*, Goldberg stated that "comparative tale studies have shown that tales are built not from uniform units but rather from pieces of varying sizes and complexities" (Goldberg, 1986, p. 167) which could range from motifs to episodes, to larger chunks of tales to even whole tales themselves. He argues that unlike Propp's assertion about identifying a single pattern underlying a number of tales, motifs are not intended to be standardized units. Tales are "artefacts designed to meet the needs and aspirations of those who maintain them" (Goldberg, 1986, p. 172). Therefore, knowledge about the construction techniques of folktales can help us understand them.

Apart from myths, legends and folktales, urban legends or contemporary legends are another form of prose literature which has become quite popular in recent years. J. H. Brunvand has defined urban legends as fictional, folk narratives that contain a plot, are told over a considerable time period, and employ an ironic twist as a symbolic message (Brunvand, 1981). Whether through word-of-mouth, or through social media and virtual networking, urban legends have come to occupy a niche in the popular cultural narratives of urban and semi-urban areas all over the world. LaPiere and Farnsworth (1936) have written that "a legend is a rumour that has become a part of the verbal heritage of the people" (p. 322). As mentioned earlier, these tales with no specific point of origin, are usually localized in order to increase its credibility, are meant for entertainment and may attempt to link unusual occurrences or disappearances to the supernatural or the macabre or make humour out of them through an ironic twist. Donavan, Mowen and Chakraborty (1999), based on their work on influence of the role of intentions and outcomes on consumer intentions to engage in word-of-mouth communications, suggest that people tend to circulate urban legends in order to communicate negative moralistic stories possessing an ironic twist. They state that diffusion processes which have been studied by marketing and consumer researchers over the years have found that word-of-mouth communication, or the spread of rumours are excellent processes of marketing. According to them, the study of urban legends can help in understanding the spread of negative word-of-mouth communications like rumours and negative product information. Sociologically, urban legends are viewed as apocryphal, i.e. they are fake and have

questionable and anonymous authorship, and yet they are supposedly believable and true. There is no possibility of verifying the truth of these stories, but still they are supposed to be believable because the source is relatively a close one. Urban legends can be widely recounted and retold in numerous variations over a considerable period of time (Donavan, Mowen, & Chakraborty, 1999). They are part of our recent history and they adapt with changes in our technology. For instance, an urban legend around a pet being destroyed in an oven a few years back, might be retold in the present times involving a microwave oven instead (Donavan, Mowen, & Chakraborty, 1999). These legends also possess a metaphorical or symbolic message about human behaviour and imperfections that get rewarded or punished through the ironic twist in the legend. With the popularity of the internet increasing steadily in the last two decades, unlike through the traditional word-of -mouth communication, urban legends have now found a new way of being transmitted to a bigger audience in a rather shorter amount of time.

3.2. Folktales from a Psychoanalytical View

A number of new approaches to the study of folklore such as psychoanalytical approach and feminist approach have emerged over the years. The psychoanalytical approach to the study of folktales entails interpretation of folklore and understanding the effects of the folk materials on the folk – the people. It is important to understand why and how the lore was created or came into existence. It is necessary to understand the hopes, desires, needs and conflicts of the people (Das R. , 2014). Psychoanalysis, a branch of psychology, was founded and made popular by Sigmund Freud. He theorized that the unconscious human mind can be investigated through specific techniques to uncover unconscious thoughts, desires and fantasies of human beings. He proposed the method of *dream interpretation* as a way to do so. He also theorised about the hidden sexual instincts of human beings, which he argued, developed during early childhood (Freud, 1913). The *drive theory* states that the object is the target of the libidinal drive (or, in his later theory, the aggressive drive). However, Freud's theory was critiqued, especially by feminist scholars, as being androcentric (or phallocentric). Contemporary feminists working within the *object relation theory* have focused on preodeipal relations with the primary caregiver (usually the mother) that determine personality and consequently the gender styles and arrangements that structure current social relations and institutions (Hockmeyer, 1988). The object relations theory also states that the notion of the 'good' and the 'bad' arises in a person's psyche during infancy, especially in relation to the primary provider (the mother's breast). Folktales, which are considered as fictional stories, often told for the purpose of

amusement, reflect the fantasies of a people metaphorically (Das R. , 2014). The 'good' and 'evil' that are presented in folktales are manifestations of what is considered as desirable or undesirable. Individual personality can't be isolated from the social and individuals living in a society have to give in to the societal demands and codes of behaviour in order to live a socially fulfilling life.

Oral literature is bound to the collective creativity, a collective psyche (Giridhar, 1985). The individual is a part of the society and through the process of socialization, one is integrated into the society. The manner in which one perceives oneself is dictated by the norms of the society, and it happens in relation to *the other*. George Herbert Mead's work on the *self,* states that the *self* of an individual is a process that comes into existence through interactions or the *conversation of gestures* with *others* in the society, and through internalisation of these interactions (Mead, 1934). Therefore, the concepts of the 'good' and the 'evil' that occur in the folktales reflect the ideas of the group and since the individual is a part of the group/society, they can relate to it and further assert it. Thus, the characters and their actions in the folktales can be understood by implementing the theory of repression in Freud's psychoanalysis. This theory states that sexual urges or libido cannot always be realised in real life by individuals because one has to adhere to the prevailing social and cultural norms that act as barriers. Depending on the society that one lives in, these barriers may vary. But there still remains certain ways of acceptable behaviour and other not so acceptable ways for both genders. Therefore, individuals have to repress these unacceptable or deviant sexual urges and other unpleasant experiences from their consciousness. Freud states that these repressed desires and experiences become deep seated in our unconscious mind and look for a release. Sudhir Kakar (1990)writes about the channelling of one's fantasies in a socially acceptable manner by taking the examples of Hindi films, contemporary Hindi novels and folktales, among other things, which he argues are ways of letting out one's suppressed urges without spoiling one's own or one's family's *izzat* (honour). He writes that Hindi films in India act as "a collective fantasy, a group daydream" (Kakar, 1990 , p. 26). In a society like ours where the topics of sex and sexuality are considered as taboo and is considered as something to be ashamed of or to be relegated to the privacy of the bedroom only, something which is not openly discussed but talked about in hushed tones or innuendoes, these films and folktales act as an acceptable medium of metaphorical release of repressed feelings. He calls cinema a world of imagination fuelled by the desire of a vast number of people, which provides an 'alternative world' where one can realise the deep-seated desires that one cannot otherwise address in reality. The Hindi

films act as the fantasy- the bridge between desire and reality for the Indian mind- because they emphasise wish-fulfilment, humbling one's competitors and victory over evil. Kakar also draws a parallel between the portrayal of evil in the films to that in fairy-tales (which are also a world of fantasy). The characters in both the fairy-tales and these films are unlike real people. These characters appear more like oversimplified caricatures without the complexities of real people and real-life situations. Kakar states that among the various narrative forms that exist, "folktales seem to be the closest in reflecting the concerns of the ego from Freud's tripartite model" (1990 , p. 50). The manner in which ego mediates between the visceral wants of the id and the imperatives of the superego, the folktales too, act as a medium of portraying the desires of the unconscious in a socially acceptable manner. The folktales are like the Hindi films that help in projection of the repressed thoughts and feelings of the people who share the same cultural mores, because according to Kakar, "individual feelings, desires and fears are an epiphenomena of macro forces located in genes, culture, history, social or sexual division of labour" (1990 , p. 141). The analysis and interpretation of folktales can therefore, provide insights into the patterns of individual behaviour and problems in the society.

The field of folklore is tied to politics of groups and states as well (Bendix & Hasan-Rokem, 2012). Antonio Gramsci was especially troubled by the dynamics between folklore and literature in the schools and he considered the *folk* as a resistance to the bureaucratic institutionalized education imparted in schools. According to him, the state apparatus denaturalizes literature that is a result of canonization and commodification of select printed books (Bacchilega, 2012). As Dorothy Noyes (2012) writes, Richard Bauman argues in his work *Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore* (1972) that it is necessary to note that folklore exists in a *social matrix* of actors seeking to accomplish their ends not as components of a system but as individuals in competition and conflict. By recounting the folktales that have been passed on through the generations, a community attempts to keep their way of live, their cultural norms and mores going. Since folktales are fictional and can be modified according to the audience and situation in which it is being narrated, they can be used as tools to propagate certain ideas that may be politically motivated. Some folklorists assert that "folklore is about boundary maintenance rather than group vertebration or even self-integration" (Noyes, 2012, p. 22). Therefore, the idea that the dominant groups utilise the folk materials to maintain a distinction between themselves and the others, whether consciously or unconsciously, cannot be overlooked. If this is considered within a patriarchal society like India, and the case of Assam in particular, we can envisage the role played by the depiction of

women in a certain manner in the folktales of Assam. There is a certain kind of power dimension at play in such a situation. The characters and their actions, the behaviour expected of them, the sanctions put on them for deviating from the expected behaviour and prescribed norms and values, all reflect how sexuality and gender is constructed and understood in the Assamese society and how violence in its various forms is an integral part of it.

3.3. Feminism and Folktales

Feminist scholars who have worked in the field of folklore in general, and on folktales in particular have presented observations that folktales of almost every society tend to have a gender bias. For instance, J. L. Fischer (1963) writes that there appear to be more male characters (at least major characters) than female ones in nearly all ethnographic collections of folktales till date, even those made by women ethnographers in matrilineal societies. Feminist research in the field of fairy-tales began as a result of the women's movements in the USA and Europe in the late 1960s (Deszcz, 2004) and the aim was to attack the patriarchal ideas reified by the fairy-tales and folktales in society. Female characters are often portrayed in a negative light, as jealous, cunning, scheming individuals or as stubborn and demanding characters who are not considerate about the others. It is because of such characters that the hero of the story usually faces the obstacles that they do. Those women who dare to be non-conformist also have to pay for their rebellious nature by getting ostracised by society or being killed. Although there are certain female characters who act as mediators and helpers to the hero in his quests, these characters are often few and far between. Another way of portraying female characters is the 'damsel in distress'. The fact that such a phrase exists in the English language, itself speaks volumes about such portrayal of females in fairy-tales and folktales. They are often presented as feeble, helpless, beautiful and submissive women who need to be rescued by the hero, who possesses the characteristics of being adventurous, chivalrous and brave, to name a few. These tales tend to promote certain attributes based on gender as desirable. While the meekness of the female is appreciated and eventually rewarded it these tales, the males are presented as virile and aggressive, which are traits related to hyper-masculinity. Elizabeth Thomson writes that in her study of Japanese folktales she has discovered that the women in Japanese folktales are represented stereotypically within a traditional hegemonic discourse (Thomson, 2008). It naturalises a 'good woman' as self-sacrificing, an expert home-maker and good hostess, but someone who possesses no power without parental or spousal permission. On the other hand, a 'bad woman' is presented as someone who exercises her agency over men, is duplicitous and imprudent and commits crimes, for which she is punishable.

The moral character of each character in fairy-tales, especially those collected and made popular by the Grimm brothers, can be ascertained by the physical appearance of the character (Neikirk, 2009). Those characters who are describes as attractive are always the ones with a good character and those who are evil are invariably depicted as ugly, deformed, or a sore sight for the eyes. This means sweeping generalizations are made about people based on something as superficial as physical appearance. And since these tales are widely popular among adults and children alike, it promotes incorrect ideas about physical beauty and a person's morality. Moreover, there is the entire discourse of portrayal of disability in association with the evil or the bad, which would require a full-fledged study of its own. But to return to the notion of beauty presented in the tales, one has to understand that it expresses the affinity of the society towards a certain physical attribute and associates it with the idea of femininity. In this sense, the female characters who are not considered as beautiful and hence are attributed with suspicion and villainy are being victimized by the societal standards of beauty. They are objectified and subordinated based on the notion of beauty. In most of the tales attractiveness is a primary feature of the heroine, along with being meek and submissive, and as Neikirk (2009) writes, this physical beauty sets them up for another form of victimization – of being kidnapped, imprisoned or raped- because of their youthful exquisiteness. Apart from this, as Joy Mutero (1999) and Alice Neikirk (2009) have noted in their respective articles, the folktales and fairy-tales seem to imply that getting married and bearing children is the ultimate goal that a girl should aspire for. This puts an unfounded emphasis on the institution of marriage for young girls and can keep them from realising their own full potential as individuals with a capacity to do more than just getting married. The perception that women can become self-reliant, and financially independent individuals and make a life for themselves is never presented in any folktale. Instead, in most folktales independent women who dare to break the societal norms and chase their dreams, are depicted in a negative light. These characters are always shown as learning a lesson the hard way and resuming their lives the way they are supposed to be.

Furthermore, the depiction of violence is quite common in folktales of various communities all over the world. The Brothers Grimm collection of folk and fairy tales has gory depictions of violence where animals are slaughtered, witches are burnt, and different characters are maimed and killed, and in re-published versions of the same stories women are portrayed as submissive beauties and men as active and violent (Neikirk, 2009). Aymara folktales, almost without exception, are full of violence and hostility, with apprehensive, crafty and treacherous

protagonist (Barre, 1950). Violence is usually portrayed as penalties for breaching the social norms. But violence such as the mutilation of the feet of Cinderella's step-sisters arising out of jealousy or hatred among female characters is also a widespread motif in folktales and fairy-tales. There have been a number of feminist reinterpretations of the tales collected by the Grimm brothers which have brought to light the depiction of heinous crimes against women such as rape, torture and murder in these tales. However, the manner in which these tales have been adapted into animated motion pictures by Disney made them look innocent and acceptable for young viewers. But it can't be denied that these tales still portray a very misogynist view of the female characters and impart patriarchal ideas of gender and gender appropriate behaviour. Apart from the physical violence or abuse, the female characters in the tales are often subjected to symbolic violence as they are themselves complicit in the perpetration of such violence. For example, when a woman is depicted as willing to accept physical or emotional abuse by her husband because she has to be the dutiful wife and she is not supposed to talk back to him or stand up to him, she is essentially enduring symbolic violence.

Gender bias in existing fairy-tale and folktale research is another area that feminist scholars have attempted to highlight. Linda Degh (1995) has noted, based on her research on folktales, that in Europe and its colonies as well as in Asia, the act of story-telling can be considered a par excellence male occupation, although in some societies like that of Assam and Bengal in India and among the Busuku people of Kenya (Florence, 2016), it is chiefly a female domain. However, the tales narrated in such a setting are also reflective of the society to which they belong and therefore, echo the patriarchal norms of the society. In other communities such as among the Nahuas in Mexico, storytelling is strictly tied to sex-roles. The storytellers are usually men who perform in public but, female storytellers narrate tales within a more intimate setting consisting of other females and children of the family only. They may often adapt the story to reflect their own social position and life experiences and deliver an acceptable message to the audience (Raby, 2007). Therefore, there seems to be a gendered bias towards the act of narration of a tale. Similar gender biases in the contemporary printed collections of tales are also attributed to the lack of female participation in the editing of folktale and fairy-tale anthologies, because even though women play a significant role in the narration of folktales in many societies, their under-representation or absence altogether in the formal editorial tasks, allows the gender biases to seep into the tales which are reproduced in print. Such bias is quite visible in the works of Stith Thompson and Max Luthi (Deszcz, 2004). Deszcz writes that an understanding of feminism, such as that proposed by the work of Salman Rushdie on feminist

reconfiguration of fairy-tales, that doesn't present men and women as brutally vindictive adversaries, is a welcome incentive that might prove useful in a society like ours. It is much needed point of view that questions patriarchal oppression and at the same time acknowledges the existence of a feminist viewpoint.

3.4. Sociological Study of Folktales

Sociologically, folktales have a distinct place in the everyday lives of people. These tales have been classified by scholars of folkloristics as fictional accounts narrated predominantly for the purpose of entertainment, although they may serve certain other purposes as well. They have a shared meaning within the community to which they belong. Folktales are usually an important tool for the process of socialization and can be considered instrumental in the pedagogy of young children. They can also act as an important device of exploration for the sociology of knowledge. Since former generations and especially parents often pass on their knowledge and experiences down to their children, they teach the children certain skills of survival and reproduction of their culture. However, as individuals, the children also learn from their own experiences and not only from what they are taught by the adults. Therefore, as Tadesse Jaleta Jirata writes in the context of children and their relation to folktales as pedagogic tools - children too are active participants in the production and reproduction of culture, especially by means of expressive performance (Jirata, 2011). Jirata's work looks at how children interpret and make meaning from folktales by reflecting on the values and norms of the former generations and by reacting and critiquing aspects of their immediate social environments (Jirata, 2011, p. 270). The lived experiences of the people of the community, albeit at times a bit exaggerated, are reflected in the folktales of a community and the norms and expectations are enshrined in these tales. On the other hand, the everyday experiences of the people can also be applied to examine all that is enshrined in the folktales. Using folktales as a medium, we can study the relationship between human thought and belief systems and the context in which they arise and flourish.

As Pierre Bourdieu analyses the process of socialization through the concept of *habitus*, he writes that the habitus refers to "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (1990, p. 53) The habitus acts as principles which generate and organize practices and representations and can be objectively regulated and regular, but are not a product of obedience to rules. The habitus, a series of actions and reactions, are determined by past practices (history) and tend to reproduce the

objective structures of which they are a product. Therefore, the habitus is a self-regenerating entity and both objectivity and subjectivity, as methods of study, are unable to account for it. It can be collectively orchestrated, it undergoes certain transformations with each reproduction and this is a generative capacity of the habitus which is infinite yet strictly limited. The habitus is internalized by individual agents, on the one hand, through socialization and through the practices carried out by the agent in everyday life within the structure. This is also known as the 'internalization of the external'. On the other hand, the actions, thoughts, perceptions and expressions of agents in the habitus also influence the habitus in certain ways, such as the collective orchestration of the habitus. This is known as the 'externalization of the internal'. Individual characters are added to the social while receiving it through the habitus when the process of externalization of the internal takes place. One learns within one's habitus and this process of internalizing can be understood through the concept of 'embodiment'. Although individual agency also plays a part in modifying the learnt behaviour or actions etc, the habitus shapes the way in which people live, by and large. The folktales of a society can therefore, be understood as a part of the habitus that carry informal guidelines which are imbibed by individuals over the years through their repetition on many occasions.

Moreover, Individuals learn to use their bodies in certain manners so as to deal with different situations in everyday life. This has been termed as the 'bodily hexis' (1977, p. 87). Bourdieu illustrated this concept through the politics of gender which manifests itself in the ways females, as opposed to males walk, stand, sit or speak or perform other day-to-day functions and actions. This concept has also been identified by Marcel Mauss (1973) as the 'techniques of the body' which suggests that actions are imposed from without (external) and although the actions seem biological, in the sense that they involve the human body, these actions have a social element in them. From the discussions in the previous segments of this work, we can therefore state that folktales of a society tend to perform this function of the exertion of force on individuals. Although this coercion may not be direct, the folktales outline the acceptable/unacceptable criteria of feminine/masculine behaviour or highlighting the positive or negative sanctions associated with the adherence to or breaking of the societal norms, among other things. Additionally, just like language or religious rituals for instance, folktales in a society too exist *a-priori* and are external to the individual. They are a part of the collective and hence general to the whole community, even though they are passed on through the memories and actions of individual actors. Consequently, folktales can be called what Durkheim (1982) refers to as *social facts*.

Gary Alan Fine writes that the diffusionist theories of folklore are sociological in nature and the Victorian folklorist Joseph Jacobs was one of the first whose theoretical orientations were similar to the way contemporary folklorists treat their material (Fine, 1987). The contemporary diffusionist theorists have tended to ignore the question of a universal psychological make-up of human beings across different societies. Rather, they believe that similarities in folklore among various communities is due to their contact with one another at some point in the past, through which the folklore have spread from one society to another. Joseph too believed that the content of folklore spread from one society to another, rather than coming into being independently in each society. He attempted to understand the structure of the social order and the process by which it is maintained, through his study of folklore. His emphasis on understanding how folklore gets distributed, by understanding the patterns of human interaction and exchange, makes his theoretical orientation sociological in nature. He held the view that any group can be a *folk* in theory, but in practice only certain groups are rendered as *the folk*. Michael Owen Jones (1975) further analysed this notion of the folk as a cognitive category which is prevalent in almost every human society and which is usually used by one group or community to describe another. In such a case, the ones who are characterized as folk are usually a rather powerless group, whereas those who characterize them as such, are usually an elite. Jacobs' work points to the fact that regardless of who is called *the folk* in practice, he was theoretically inclined to contextualize the creation and the diffusion of folktales, and his theory resembles the sociological works on networks of cultural diffusion. He suggested that folktales are created by individuals, which is then accepted by a social circle and over time they get diffused to other groups and societies. However, Jacobs' work has been critiqued often for the lack of empirical evidence that could have illustrated his theories and made them easier to understand.

CHAPTER 4

NARRATIVES OF VIOLENCE IN FOLKTALES OF ASSAM

There has been a long tradition of folklore in Assam that continues till date. Apart from folk songs, dances, beliefs and customs, festivals, cuisines, etc, the languages and oral literature form an important part of the everyday lives of the people. Riddles, jokes, folk sayings, along with folktales, myths and legends are a rich source of entertainment and pedagogy in the Assamese society. The particular setting and way of narration of these folktales give them a different aura from the narration of any other incident. For instance, the tale usually begins with an event that occurred in an indefinite past. It gives the audience the sense that this had taken place sometime in the past but it is something that can't be traced back in history (which is considered to be a legitimate, documented account of past events). This gives the folktales an aura of mystery and fantasy. Most of the folktales which are popular in the Assamese language today, were collected from the masses by Lakshminath Bezborua who documented them in writing and later in print. These tales sometimes question the given hierarchy of caste and class in the society and reflect the position of women in society, but the gender roles which are relatively rigid, and the gendered abuse depicted in these tales never question the status-quo of women vis-à-vis men in the society. In fact, these tales continue to reproduce gender-based stereotypes.

This study is an attempt to analyse the depiction of violence against women in some folktales of Assam[3]. In these folktales the title of the tale itself indicates the gendered aspect of the story. For instance, some of the tales are named after the female protagonists of the story such as *Tejimola, Champawatir Xadhu* (Champawati's Tale), *Chilanir Jiyekar Xadhu* (Tale of the Kite's Daughter)*, Tula Aru Teja* (Tula and Teja)*, Mekurir Jiyekar Xadhu* (Tale of the Cat's Daughter) etc, which were first put into writing by Lakshminath Bezborua in the mid-19th century in his most popular collection - *Burhi Air Xadhu* (Grandmother's Tales). Lakshminath Bezborua collected these folktales from the common people and compiled them into a book which has since, undergone numerous reprints and is one of the most popular books in Assam, among children and adults alike. Bezborua made two more compilations during his lifetime- *Kaka Deuta Aru Nati Lora* (Grandfather and Grandson) and *Junuka*. Although these tales are

---

[3] Refer to Appendix II

now available in the written form and are read as literature as well, they are equally widespread in the form of oral narratives. They are narrated to children as bed-time stories and are meant to spread the cultural values among children.

Most of the folktales end with a moral message and these messages are often about the behaviour and character of women. This is not to deny that there are depictions of male characters as well and these characters may also be subjected to challenging situations, but those tales that describe abuse against women are the most frequently recounted ones. And this raises the question -why? It is important to note that there also exist certain folktales wherein the female characters are depicted as brave and wise saviours, but such tales are few and far between.

4.1. Gender roles in Folktales of Assam

The role of women is very important in almost every Assamese folktale. Folktales always need a specific environment for narration where, usually, it is the grandmother who acts as the storyteller to her grandchildren, and not the grandfather. In the tradition of storytelling in Assam it is the grandmother who has the principal role in narrating the tales to the grandchildren. "It is perhaps for this reason that Lakshminath Bezborua entitled the compilation of folktales as *Burhi Air Xadhu,* i.e. grandmother's tales" (2017, p. 89). In the Assamese society the position and role of women is determined by the patriarchal structure of kinship and this structure is visible in the world depicted in the folktales as well. A typical traditional Assamese couple can be characterized as being in a monogamous, reciprocal relationship with a relatively dominant position of the husband in terms of economic, political and social standing. The woman is usually financially dependent on the husband for running the household, although she may engage in certain economically productive activities like growing vegetables in the kitchen garden, or weaving, which can be sold in the market or exchanged for other goods in dire circumstances.

The ideas of masculinity and femininity in the Assamese folktales present a bias against women. The gender binary is strongly followed and there is usually no mention of a third gender in these folktales. When the concept of 'women' is used in these tales, it refers to cis-gendered, heterosexual women only. The category may include a range of age differences, but the idea of heterosexuality is a given and so is the idea of the cis-woman. In the same way, the male characters are also always heterosexual cis-men, and often there are depictions of hyper-masculine characteristics like bravery, chivalry, aggressive behaviour. Attributes like

intelligence, and wisdom are usually associated with the male characters and are expressed as desirable. Whereas, attributes having a negative connotation like jealousy, hatred, greed and selfishness are associated with the female characters, for which these characters usually have to reform themselves. For instance, in *Tejimola, Champawatir Xadhu, Mekurir Jiyekar Xadhu, Chilanir Jiyekar Xadhu*, *Tula Aru Teja* and *Kanchani*, there are instances of female jealousy that lead to major plot twists. In another tale, *Sarabjan* (The All-Knowing One) there are two instances of women's greed one of which comments that even a queen is not safe from such whims, and the other forms the premise which ultimately results in her husband becoming a famous personality. *Lubhuni* (The Greedy Woman) is another tale that focuses on a greedy housewife who suffers a great deal and has to endure terrible ailments because of her greed. This presents the attitude that women are fickle and morally weak and can easily fall for material things and worldly desires, which is not appreciated in society. Furthermore, *Kulakhyoni Tirota* (The Woman with Evil Signs) is a tale about a wicked daughter-in-law who frames her unsuspecting mother-in-law as immoral and tries to get rid of her by lying to her husband. But eventually the husband finds out the truth and in a fit of rage drags his wife by the hair and threatens to kill her if she won't own up to her lies. The wife complies and is kicked out of the household. The man remarries and lives happily with his mother and new wife. This tale is again a moral commentary on what a woman should not be like. Another tale *Soropa Tirota* (The Lazy Woman) is the story of a woman who feigns illness to shirk work and her husband has to do all the household chores. She also secretly prepares and eats delicious food in the house while her husband is away and pretends to be sick and unable to eat when he returns. So, when the husband finds out the truth one day, he beats her black and blue, and she learns her lesson to never shirk work or be greedy. This folktale is aimed as a lesson on the qualities of being a good housewife, outlining the things that they should do and those that they should not.

A self-sacrificing attitude coupled with compassion, physical beauty and dexterity are seen as desirable attributes of an 'ideal woman'. The tale of *Kanchani*, focuses on the steadfast love and devotion of a docile and obedient wife towards her husband (who was a human who had been cursed and transformed into a dog). The husband is transformed back into human form because of Kanchani's love and devotion, but the king hears about the beauty of Kanchani and wants to marry her. So, he tortures and kills her husband, and Kanchani willingly sacrifices her own life to be with her husband even in death. Another tale *Lakhimi Tirota* (The Woman with Lakshmi-like qualities) focuses on the prosperity brought into the household by the young

daughter-in-law, who is shown as having Goddess Lakshmi-like qualities and is appreciated. But the downside of this tale is that not all women have such 'qualities' and so, any misfortune or misery in the household will be attributed to the women without those qualities. The tale *Randhani* (The Cook) is similar to the *Lakhimi Tirota* and highlights the Lakshmi-like qualities of the protagonist who brings prosperity and happiness to the household.

On the other hand, such characters become a bench-mark to compare other female characters in tales or women in real life, who may not possess such 'qualities' and will be blamed for bringing bad luck or misfortune to the household. In the tale *Thupori* (The Ugly/Unskilled Woman), the woman is portrayed as unskilled in weaving clothes, but lies to the man about her weaving skills and gets married. However, later when the husband keeps asking her to display her skills and her lie is about to be exposed, she devises a plan and ensures that he never again asks her to display her skills. This tale is an exception in which the woman being clever gets away with her lies and doesn't get punished for it. But it also highlights the expectation of a certain skill set for a woman to be eligible for marriage. There are a few exceptions in terms of tales such as *Bhusung Pohu* (The Laughing Stock)*, Maghor Bihu* (Bihu in the month of Magh)*, Chaul Puriya* (The Man Who Ate Huge Quantities of Rice)*, Chari Chor* (The Four Thieves) that represent women as clever, enterprising individuals who save the day through their wit and bravery. However, such tales are very few and not as popular.

In almost every Assamese folk genre, the heroine has always been depicted as the object of beauty to be admired. Being beautiful is one of the most essential features for the female character so that she can have an advantageous marriage and a blissful life. It is evident from the stories of *Chilanir Jiyekar Xadhu* or *Tula Aru Teja* where the merchant and the king respectively, fall in love with the female protagonist at first sight because of the beauty of the female protagonist. There are certain standards of beauty for a woman in the Assamese society as well as superstitions about women not adhering to these standards. A case in point is that, a woman with short and ragged hair is considered as ugly and unlucky omen because the traditional Assamese society believes that the principal feature of beauty in a woman is long and smooth hair (2017, p. 78). Therefore, cutting off a woman's hair essentially makes her ugly, marks her as unlucky and makes her less feminine in a way, which is why it is acceptable as a punishment for 'deviant' behaviour among women. Traditionally, there has been a notion of shame attached to a woman with shorn hair and as a punishment it can be understood as an act of humiliation or emotional violence. Moreover, in *Ow-Kuwori* (The *Ow* Princess) and *Paneshoi,* the woman is described as an object of male desire and the whole narrative revolves

around the hero's attempts to acquire the heroine as his own. The desires of the woman are not addressed in these tales.

4.2. Violence: A Recurring Motif

Heise (1998) writes that "Most cultures approve of physical punishment of women and/or children under certain circumstances" (p. 281). She further writes that such approval is usually bound by clearly defined cultural rules about rights of an individual to hit another, the circumstances under which they can hit the other person and to what degree. When hitting someone as a form of punishment is considered culturally acceptable, such physical violence and abuse is considered justified as long as the abuse falls within the socially accepted rules and others in the community refrain from intervening when such an incident takes place. If, however, the abuse is carried out by someone who does not have the perceived right to reprimand the other, or the violence becomes extreme - which are cases not sanctioned by the cultural rules – then others, be it relatives or family members, neighbours, or the police for that matter, come to intervene. In India, to a large extent, there is a cultural tolerance for the spanking of children by parents as a means of disciplining them if the children disobey the parents or other elders. An article published in the Indian Express states that according to the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), a 2007 study on child abuse in India by the Ministry of Women and Child Development found that 69 per cent of children reported physical abuse. On an average, 50 per cent of children reported being abused in family situations, 88.6 per cent of these by their parents. And two out of every three children attending school faced corporal punishment (Alvez, 2017). In terms of physical punishment of women, in India traditionally, it has been acceptable for a husband to hit his wife if she 'stepped out of line' or didn't perform her 'wifely duties' properly. Many other cultures around the world suggest similar notions in terms of physically disciplining women if the cause for such violence is seen as just. It is considered as the husband's right to strike his wife if the reasons are within the culturally accepted ones which may include unfulfilled household duties as a wife, disobeying the wishes and commands of the husband, sexual infidelity, etc. However, if the husband crosses a line and becomes exceptionally abusive or abuses his wife without a 'just' cause, the others usually intervene. In a study conducted by G. Narayana in Uttar Pradesh, he found that a substantial proportion of men strongly supported wife beating as a means to 'discipline' women who would disobey their husband's or elders' instructions (1996). Heise (1998) wrote that cross-cultural studies carried out by Sanday (1981) and Levinson (1989) on rape and family violence, respectively found that those cultures that tend to overlook the use

of force as a way for individuals to resolve conflict tend to have more instances of abuse of women.

In India, according to data released by the NHFS-4 (2015-16) in January 2018, it was found that for women the acceptability of abuse increased with age, while it decreased for men. It also found that the acceptance of physical abuse was higher in rural areas compared to urban ones and that this acceptance decreased with an increase in education and wealth (Menon V. , 2018). There is a variation across India in the attitude towards wife-beating. The state of Telengana has the highest rate of acceptance of domestic abuse among men at about 75 per cent men in favour of wife-beating, while Sikkim has the lowest acceptance rate among men with just 6% men being in favour of domestic abuse against their spouse. Among women, the highest percentage of agreement for such practices was recorded in Telengana and Manipur (both about 84 per cent) and the lowest of about 17 per cent in Sikkim. Moreover, among all the respondents those adhering to Christianity (about 51.6 per cent men and about 56.9 per cent women) justified physical abuse of wives by husbands, whereas the followers of Jainism (19 per cent men and 29 per cent women) showed the least acceptance for such abuse. According to the statistics compiled by the Assam Police (2018), the number of cases reported on various crimes against women in Assam is considerably high. In the year 2018, based on data available till April, there have been about 3000 cases of abuse by husband, 45 cases of dowry related deaths, about 534 cases of rape, and more than 3000 cases of molestation and kidnapping combined. Such statistics reflect that the Assamese society is not very friendly or secure for women.

In the context of the depiction of violence in the folktales, both the female and the male characters in the folktales have a part to play. While in most cases a female character faces abuse at the hands of a male character as a consequence of her flouting the norms and offending the moral sense of the community, there are also cases where female character is a perpetrator of abuse and aggression on another female character. It is therefore necessary to understand how patriarchy is woven into the storyline and influences the actions of the characters and how those patriarchal principles get reinforced through the characters in these folktales. The cases of women attempting to or engaging in abuse of other women, their subordination and humiliation, being jealous or competitive, can be understood in the context of the classic patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988) in Assam. The subordination of women by other women, the jostling for attention, or the envy can be seen as bargains that they attempt to make with the patriarchal setting. The majority of the stories prescribe what a woman's characteristics should

be and what should not be, that is, they highlight the socially desired qualities. The motifs of the shrew, the jealous co-wife or step-mother, the greedy woman, the beggar women, etc are quite common in these folktales. There are also motifs of bigamy or polygamy, that tend to recur quite often in these tales.

Physical assault on women is depicted in the tales[4] *Tejimola, Champawatir Xadhu, Mekurir Jiyekar Xadhu, Chilanir Jiyekar Xadhu*, *Tula Aru Teja*, *Kanchani, Soropa Tirota, Kulakhyoni Tirota* and many more. The women are subjected to thrashing, bodily mutilation, murder, as well as emotional abuse and humiliation for attempting to or breaking the rules. There are also cases of violence due to jealousy and greed. Although there are no explicit expressions of rape or molestation, the fact that the heroes marry the woman of their desire without asking for her consent (*Paneshoi, Ow-Kuwori*) or kidnap a woman and make her his wife (*Mekurir Jiyekar Xadhu),* strongly points to the fact that a woman may be forced into a sexual relationship or marriage.in the *Mekurir Jiyekar Xadhu,* the water spirit carries the elder sister away, and the merchant takes the younger sister with him. The women here, are presented as passive objects to whom things happen. Their will is not considered and they are portrayed as victims of circumstances who are carried away by strangers and made into wives. In the *Chilanir Jiyekar Xadhu* too, the tradesman kidnaps the protagonist and enslaves her, making her work to aid his own business. Women are also represented as subordinate to their husbands and fathers which shows that they do not really have much power within the household. There are also instances where the women tend to behave in a particular manner out of fear of punishment, e.g. The step-mother in *Tejimola*, the queens in *Burha Burhiye Bogori Guti Rowa*, etc. Moreover, young girls are often married to much older men, who are already married. Bigamy and polygamy are accepted but there is no mention of polyandry.

In Assamese folktales, the qualities of an ideal woman are equated to the ability of the woman to perform household chores proficiently, manage the household by being thrift and maintain good relationships within the family as well as with outsiders. She is supposed to be a good homemaker but she is not supposed to go out of the domestic sphere to earn a livelihood. The male characters are the ones who go out of the domestic sphere to earn for the household. The female characters are expected to be docile, sacrificing and caring. Manashi Borah (2008) writes "Among the middle-aged women, the mother figure is always portrayed as a symbol of tolerance and loyalty, who wishes well for the children, whereas the stepmother and co-wives

---

[4] Refer to Appendix II

are depicted as cruel, immoral, disobedient, disloyal and cunning persons" (p. 18). The women are supposed to remain within the metaphorical *Lakshman-rekha.* Those women who do not fit into this profile are termed as less than ideal or at times 'deviant' or 'offending' the moral sensibilities, who are in need of negative sanctions to correct them of their deviance. This correction of behaviour usually takes place through physical violence like thrashing, bodily mutilation and even death, as well as through emotional violence in the form of humiliation in society or being banished by kin and society in general (Goswami N. , 2009). There is an element of *symbolic violence*[5] (Bourdieu, 2002) as well. For instance, in *Kanchani* the woman willingly complies with the societal dictates and sacrifices her own life. In *Champawatir Xadhu,* her husband leaves her for six years and her perseverance is tested, but to what end? She is made to live alone, hoping to be united with her husband at the end of the specified time and she complies with this imposition of misery and loneliness.

However, there is no introspection of the reasons as to why a woman may feel the need to act out or break the norms of society. The tales depict these female characters as inherently evil. But they overlook the fact that no individual is born evil and tend to make the characters two-dimensional. It is the circumstances, experiences and life choices presented to them that makes a person who they are. The folktales tend to disregard the perspectives of the women who are portrayed as offenders. If we take the example of Tejimola's step-mother, we have to consider that as a woman, she had to face the humiliation attached to being childless and then live with the constant fear of abuse by her husband, while rearing a child. Although this doesn't justify the violence that she perpetrates on the young Tejimola, it does add a nuance to her character which is usually missing in the narration and interpretations of the folktale. In the other tales where the female characters are represented as jealous of the young co-wife (*Chilanir Jiyekar Xadhu, Mekurir Jiyekar Xadhu)* the reason for their envy is not looked into. It is assumed that a woman would be happy being the wife of a king or a wealthy merchant. But it is not taken into consideration whether she is sexually satisfied in the relationship, or whether she gets enough time and affection from her husband. The husband is free to marry multiple women over the years, often girls who are much younger to him, and the women are expected to accept this as the husband's will because he is the patriarch. However, the fact that such an arrangement is rewarding for certain parties only and may be offensive or even demeaning for the other parties involved, is hardly addressed in the tales.

---

[5] Refers to that form of violence wherein the social agent upon whom the violence is being perpetrated, is complicit in its perpetration.

Food and food habits form an integral part of human society and culture. Therefore, motifs related to food in general and certain food items in particular, appear quite often in the folktales of Assam. These motifs often act as crucial points for the sub-plots within the folktales, as seen in *Soropa Tirota* and *Sarabjan*. In the Assamese society there is a fascination with fish, as depicted in *Lubhuni*, and the fish-head in a fish curry is considered to be a delicacy by many. Therefore, in certain folktales, the issue of not serving the fish-head during a meal as seen in the tale *Kulakhyoni Tirota,* may lead to a domestic dispute which has the potential to escalate into a much bigger quarrel over time or end in abuse and violence. For instance, in the *Mekurir Jiyekar Xadhu*, the whole plot begins with the cat's desire to eat fish and the mistress not sharing it with her and ends violently for the elder co-wives.

As Christine Goldberg (1986) has stated, folktales are artistic products. They have been produced to fulfil a purpose, they have structures and functions, and even beauty. However, one has to enquire what purpose is served by these folktales of Assam that depict torture, subordination, kidnapping and murder of women? For a child to whom such a tale is being narrated, the incidents of the tale would appear as something that happens in a fantasy world where there are talking animals and magic spells, where kings and queens still rule, where good always wins over evil and justice prevails, where all pain and suffering ends by the end of the story and there is usually a happy ending for the deserving characters. Therefore, the violence might not register in a child's mind in the same way that it does in the case of an adult. A child who has not been witness to, or a victim of violence or aggression and abuse, may have no imagination to picture the gore and pain of crushing a young girl's head or cutting off a person's nose in reality. Such a child will also not realize that the story could be a derivative of some real incident, because these tales are narrated in a particular manner that makes them appear as something that might have happened in the past. But once a child has heard or imagined the events of a tale, those ideas may remain with them into their adulthood. These subtle ideas planted during childhood, in conjunction with the socialization process which is significantly dominated by similar notions about gender relations, can morph into their perspective of reality (Neikirk, 2009). And it will ensure the reproduction of those ideas through narrations to the next generation.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Folktales often act in a prescriptive role to prepare younger generations to adapt better to the social life of the community. They are often employed as bedtime stories for children and although they are fictional, they do have a message to convey. The explicit depiction of violence in these tales, especially that against women, makes them an essential field for sociological enquiry. One of the reasons for the unchanging nature of the storyline of the folktales of Assam could be attributed to what folklorists have suggested over the years as something that narrators tend to do out of respect towards tradition or the original purpose/intent of the tale. Another reason suggested by folklorists is the lack of imagination on the part of the narrator in terms of the series of events in the tale, although this explanation is debatable. Narrators often make changes to the events or characters to suit their style of narration, time constraints or audience. They may add or omit certain sequences or creatures/characters, give their own twists and turns to the events in the tale etc. Goldberg writes that "people seem to find it easier – or perhaps preferable- to retell an old story than to create a brand new one" and the old story can be "customized as necessary" (Goldberg, 1986, p. 168). However, they tend to remain true to the overall structure and message of the tale. Since the folktales used for this study are available in print, they can be considered to be prone to losing out on the modifications that a story teller or an oral narrator would incorporate. Being printed and published also gives these tales a more or less rigid structure which is subsequently reproduced.

Folktales can also be understood as the defence mechanism of a community that helps its members in the projection of repressed feelings, thoughts and desires and releasing the repressed tensions. The tales act as a bridge between these latent desires and the socially acceptable notions of morality. However, if looked at from a sociological perspective, there could be larger structural causes that affect the way in which these tales are narrated. One of the reasons that has surfaced through this study is the patriarchal structure of society which places women in a subordinate position in relation to men. There are certain ideas that exist due to this structure, which ensures that the relation between the two genders remain unchanged and the folktales become a tool to reiterate these ideas. The folktales address these ideas as the

norms of the society and promote them with each narration over the years. When the physical and emotional abuse upon a woman is validated and glorified and is considered as entertainment, the purpose of these tales can be understood as a means to carry forward a patriarchal mindset without critically evaluating it. Additionally, Janet Sayers (1987) states Melanie Klein's work that has highlighted the fact that women, going by the patriarchal dictates of society, are supposed to be non-aggressive and owing to this stereotype, they are prone to repressing their anger or sexual desires. Thus, they tend to reproduce these stereotypes. Those who do not repress these feelings and instead act them out, are labelled as offenders of the society's code of conduct and morality.

The status of women in Assam is not completely deplorable in every aspect of life. According to the Census (2011), the sex ratio of Assam is 958 females per 1000 males and the child sex ratio is 962 females per 1000 males. This is comparatively higher than the national average of 943 females per 1000 males and the national child sex-ratio of 919 females per 1000 males. The average literacy rate of Assam is 72.19 percent. The male literacy rate is 77.85 percent whereas the female literacy rate is 66.27 percent. The female literacy rate of Assam is slightly above the national female literacy rate which is 65.46 percent. But the workforce participation rate of females in Assam is quite low, at 22.46 percent, whereas that of males is 53.59 percent. Furthermore, based on a statement of crime against women for the years 2005 to 2017 published by the Assam Police (2018), one can state that the number of crimes against women seem to have increased over the years. However, there is also the possibility that the awareness among people about crimes against women has increased and now more and more people come forward to report such crimes. In either scenario, the crime rates against women show that as a society, we are still quite far from ensuring the safety and security of women. The customs in the Assamese society often dictate a very patriarchal outlook, especially in the context of morality of women. There exists a number of rules and restrictions under the garb of traditions, aimed at taming a woman's sexuality. Although there has been a tradition in Assam of worshipping different forms of the female as deities, in everyday life women do face a lot of challenges and obstacles. Culturally, there exists a fear of the supernatural or evil spirits and innocent women often fall prey to the violence resulting from such superstitions. The vast number of cases of witch hunting that have come into the light over the years is evidence of the fact that any kind of behaviour that differs from the accepted norm is seen as deviance that needs to be kept in check, especially if signs of such 'deviance' is presented by women. Women often fall victim to aggression and abuse even at the hands of near and dear ones.

Although the social structure dictates the rules of conduct, and individuals may however make use of their own experiences and make modifications to the existing rules to navigate their way through life. However, the basic structure at large remains more or less unchanged. For instance, at the very beginning of this work two scenes from the movie *Kothanodi* are referred to. Although the film-maker attempted to reimagine four of the popular folktales of Assam, he somehow falls short of questioning the status-quo. Far from the over-simplified and caricature-like characters that are often depicted in the folktales, he successfully adds layers and depth to the characters in the film and makes them more realistic and relatable. However, he adds a few more qualities to these characters that reinforces the existing notion of the deviant 'offending' female. For example, in the film he portrays Tejimola's step-mother as a drunkard. This adds to the negativity associated with women and drinking. It can be read as a stand that women who drink alcohol are necessarily wicked or have questionable morals.

We, as human beings, are governed by our thoughts and the rules and regulations by which we abide in society are products of our thoughts. Folktales are a tool to carry on these rules, passing them on through the generations. Hence, it is crucial to understand the impact that such folktales might have on the psyche of individuals (especially children). Some scholars of folkloristics believe that oral narratives also serve the function of 'a critique of the socio-cultural mores of the societal group of which it is an ethnopoetic documentation' (Giridhar, 1985) and thus are self-reflective. If this were to be considered, why has the representation of women in folktales of Assam remained more or less unchanged over the years? Can it be explained through the theory of the *stemma* model that postulates that the narrator tends to maintain the tales as they heard them out of respect for tradition? Or has there been any changes with the coming of mass literacy, access to mass media and popular media and the internet? Therefore, there is a need for further, in-depth research to understand why the female body becomes the site of violence in these folktales and if there have been any changes in the way that folktales of Assam depict women.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1 Peter 3: 1-7- Instructions to Wives and Husbands. (2011, February 10). Retrieved from
https://www.enterthebible.org/Controls/feature/tool_etb_resource_display/resourcebox.as
px?selected_rid=165&original_id=60

(2011). National Crime Records Bureau. Retrieved from http://ncrb.nic.in/.

(2018). Retrieved February 28, 2018, from www.merriamwebster.com: https://www.merriam-
webster.com/dictionary/myth

Acharyya, K. (2017, April 23). *Witch-hunting in Assam: A stringent law is the need of the hour to curb
the practice.* Retrieved June 25, 2018, from FirstPost:
https://www.firstpost.com/india/witch-hunting-in-assam-a-stringent-law-is-the-need-of-
the-hour-to-curb-the-practice-3398704.html

Acker, J. (2002). Women and Social Stratification. A Case of Intellectual Sexism. In S. Jackson, & S.
Scott, *Gender: A Sociological Reader* (pp. 89-92). London, New York: Routledge.

Adams, R. (2017, May 10). *Michel Foucault: Biopolitics and Biopower.* Retrieved February 16, 2018,
from Critical Legal Thinking - Law and the Political:
http://criticallegalthinking.com/2017/05/10/michel-foucault-biopolitics-biopower/#fnref-
22546-9

Alvez, G. (2017, September 17). *Spare the Child: Physical punishment is rarely a lasting solution to a
disciplinary issue.* Retrieved July 5, 2018, from The Indian Express:
https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/health/corporal-punishment-is-rarely-a-lasting-
solution-to-a-disciplinary-issue-the-impact-lasts-into-adulthood-4846940/

Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*
(Revised Edition ed.). London and New York: Verso.

Assam Population Census Data 2011. (2011). Retrieved June 28, 2018, from Census 2011:
https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/assam.html

Bacchilega, C. (2012). Folklore and Literature. In *A Companion to Folklore* (pp. 447-463). Wiley
Blackwell.

Barre, W. L. (1950). Aymara Folktales. *International Journal of American Linguistics, Vol. 16, No. 1*,
40-45.

Barua, G. (1972). *Asam Buranji* . Guwahati : Publication Board Assam.

Baruani, T. D. (1937). *Sandhiyar Sadhu.*

Bascom, W. (1965). The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives. *The Journal of American Folklore, Vol.
78, No. 307*, 3-20.

Bauman, R. (1972). Differential Identity and The Social Base of Folklore. In A. Paredes, & R. Bauman
(Eds.), *Towards New Perspectives in Folklore* (pp. 31-41). Austin: University of Texas Press.

Beauvoir, S. d. (2011/1949). *The Second Sex.* (C. Borde, & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.) London:
Vintage.

Belsky, J. (1980). Child Maltreatment: An Ecological Integration. *American Psychologist, 35*, 320-335.

Bendix, R. F., & Hasan-Rokem, G. (2012). Introduction. In R. F. Bendix, & G. Hasan-Rokem (Eds.), *A Companion to Folklore* (pp. 1-6). Place of publication not identified: Wiley-Blackwell.

Benjamin, W. (1996). *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume I 1913-1926.* (M. Bullock, & M. W. Jennings, Eds.) Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Bezborua, L. (1913). *Kaka Deuta Aru Nati Lora.*

Bezborua, L. (1990). *Burhi Air Xadhu.* Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall.

Borah, M. (2008). Women in Assamese Folktales . *Indian Folklife, Serial No. 31*, 17-19.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice.* Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1982). *What Talking Means. The Economy of Linguistic Exchanges.* Paris: Fayard.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2002). *Masculine Domination.* (R. Nice, Trans.) Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Brunvand, J. H. (1981). *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings.* New York: WW Norton and Company.

Butler, J. (1990). Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire. In J. Butler, *Gender Trouble Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (pp. 1-34). New York, London: Routledge.

Chakraborty, J., & Borah, A. (2013). Witch Hunting in Assam: Strategising Alternative Media for Women Empowerment and Overcoming Superstition. *Journal of North East India Studies, 3*(2).

Chang, A. (2018). *This 1955 'Good House Wife's Guide' Explains How Wives Should Treat Their Husbands*. Retrieved May 6, 2018, from LittleThings: https://www.littlethings.com/1950s-good-housewife-guide/

Chowdhury, J. (1985). Basic Pattern in Myth Making: Myths of Arunachal Tribes. In S. Sen (Ed.), *Folklore in North-East India* (pp. 17-26). New Delhi, Gauhati: Omsons Publications.

Coomaraswamy, R. (2002). *Integration of the Human Rights of Women and the Gender.* United Nations Human Rights Commission. Retrieved from http://www.unhcr.ch/huricane/huricane.nsf

Crime Against Women. (2018). Retrieved June 25, 2018, from Assam Police: http://www.assampolice.gov.in/women_crime.php

Crowell, N., & Burgess, A. W. (Eds.). (1996). *Understanding Violence Against Women.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Das, R. (2014). Psychoanalytical Study of Folktale. *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS), Vol 19, Issue 10, Ver. II*, 13-18.

Das, V. (1976). Masks and Faces: An Essay on Punjabi Kinship. *Contributions To Indian Sociology, 10*(1), 1-30.

Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. (1993, December 20). New York: United
Nations General Assembly. Retrieved June 25, 2018, from
http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm

Degh, L. (1995). *Narratives in Society: A Performer-Centered Study of Narration.* Helsinki: Academia
Scientiarum Fennica.

Delphy, C. (1977). *The Main Enemy.* London: Women's Research and Resources Centre.

Deszcz, J. (2004). Salman Rushdie's Attempt at a Feminist Fairytale Reconfiguration in Shame.
Folklore, 115(1), 27-44.

Dobash, R., & Dobash, R. P. (1979). *Violence Against Wives.* New York: Free Press.

Donavan, D. T., Mowen, J. C., & Chakraborty, G. (1999). Urban Legends: The Word-of-Mouth
Communication of Morality through Negative StoryContent. *Marketing Letters, 10*(1), 23-34.

Dre`ze, J., & Sen, A. (2002). *India: Development and Participation.* Delhi, Oxford: Oxford University
Press.

Durkheim, E. (1960/1893). *The Division of Labour in Society.* (G. Simpson, Trans.) Illinois: The Free
Press of Glencoe.

Durkheim, E. (1982). *The Rules of Sociological Method.* (S. Lukes, Ed., & W. D. Halls, Trans.) New
York, London, Toronto, Sydney: The Free Press.

Editors. (1998, July 20). *Sanction.* Retrieved July 12, 2018, from Encyclopaedia Britannica:
https://www.britannica.com/topic/sanction

Engels, F. (2004/1884). *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State.* Resistance Books.

Fine, G. A. (1987). Joseph Jacobs: A Sociological Folklorist. *Folklore, 98*(2), 183-193.

Fischer, J. L. (1963). The Sociopsychological Analysis of Folktaless. *Current Anthropology, 4*(3), 235-
295.

Florence, N. (2016). Female role models in Bukusu folktales: Education at the Mother's Hearth. *3:
1185238.*

Foucault, M. (1976). *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality. Volume 1.* (1. R Hurley, Trans.)
New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Freud, S. (1913). *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Third ed.). (A. Brill, Trans.) New York: The Macmillan
Company. Retrieved 2010, from www.bartleby.com/285/.

Frohn, C. (2016, June). Ela and Ada: Gender, Class and Performativity in Penny Romances. *Master
Thesis*. Utrecht University. Retrieved from
https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:llkiXzvsSclJ:https://dspace.librar
y.uu.nl/bitstream/handle/1874/336649/Ela%2520and%2520Ada%2520-
%2520Master%2520Thesis%2520Celine%2520Frohn%252027%2520June.pdf%3Fsequence%
3D2%26isAllowed%3Dy+&cd=6&hl=e
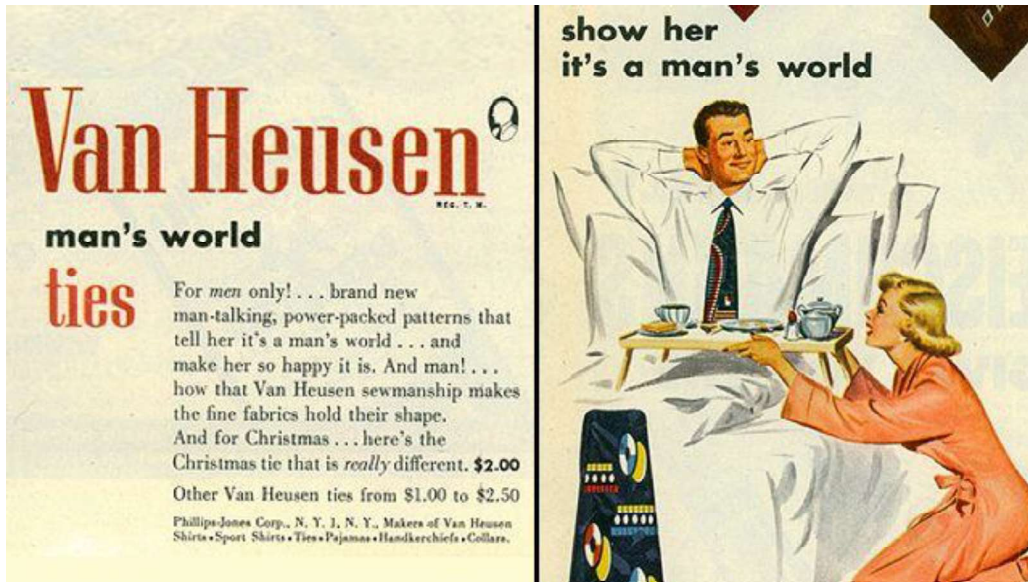
Full Text of " (50) Skanda Purana. Vol. 2". (n.d.). Retrieved May 28, 2018, from https://archive.org/stream/50SkandaPurana.Vol.2/%2850%29%20Skanda%20Purana.%20Vol.%202_djvu.txt

Gait, S. E. (2012/1906). *A Comprehensive History of Assam.* Pragun Publications.

Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, Peace and Peace Research. *Journal of Peace Research, 6*(3), 167-191.

Giridhar, P. (1985). Folk Literature as Critique of Culture. In S. Sen (Ed.), *Folklore in Nort-East India* (pp. 46-53). New Delhi, Gauhati: Omsons Publlications.

Goldberg, C. (1986). The Construction of Folktales. *Journal of Folklore Research, Vol. 23, No. 2/3, Special Double Issue: TheComparative Method in Folklore*, 163-176.

Goodare, J. (1998). Women and the Witch-Hunt in Scotland. *Social History, 23*(3), 288-308.

Goswami, N. (2009). *'Assamese Women's Folk Narrative: Tales from Secondary Sources' in The World of Women in Assamese Folk Narratives. (PhD Thesis).* Guwahati: Gauhati University. Retrieved May 22, 2016, from http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/69586/9/09_chapter%203.pdf

Goswami, P. (1970). *Ballads and Tales of Assam.* Guwahati: University of Guwahati.

Goswami, P. (1980). *Tales of Assam.* Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam.

Grammatas, T. (2015). *Pedagogical use of the storytelling in a contemporary educational environment*. Retrieved from Theodore Grammatas: http://theodoregrammatas.com/en/pedagogical-use-of-the-storytelling-in-a-contemporary-educational-environment/

Hall, C. (1992). *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History.* Cambridge: Polity.

Handoo, J. (1985). Introduction. In S. Sen (Ed.), *Folklore in Nort-East India* (pp. 1-16). New Delhi, Gauhati: Omsons Publications.

Hazarika, B. (Director). (2015). *Kothanodi* [Motion Picture].

Heise, L. L. (1998). Violence Against Women: An Integrated, Ecological Framework. *Violence Against Women, 4*(3), 262-290. doi:10.1177/1077801298004003002

Hockmeyer, A. (1988). Object Relations Theory and Feminism: Strange Bedfellows. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, Vol. 10, No. 1*, 20-28.

Hodge, J. (2011, August 29). *Edmonton Salon Ads Cross a Major Line*. Retrieved from Gender Focus: http://www.gender-focus.com/2011/08/29/edmonton-salon-ads-cross-a-major-line/

Iyengar, R. (2015, August 18). *A State in India Just Outlawed Witch-Hunting, but Many Fear That Won't Stop the Practice.* Retrieved April 19, 2018, from TIME: http://time.com/4000006/assam-witch-hunting-bill-passed-jharkhand-india/

Jackson, S., & Scott, S. (2002). *Gender: A Sociological Reader.* London, New York: Routledge.

Jirata, T. J. (2011). Children as Interpreters of Culture: Producing Meanings from Folktales in Southern. *Journal of Folklore Research, 48*(3), 269- 292.

Jones, M. O. (1975). *The Hand Made Object and Its Maker.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kakar, S. (1990). *Intimate Relations. Exploring Indian Sexuality.* Penguin Books.

Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining With Patriarchy. *Gender and Society, Vol. 2, No. 3, Special Issue to Honor Jessie Bernard.*, 274-290.

Karve, I. (1994). The Kinship Map of India. In P. Uberoi (Ed.), *Family, Kinship and Marriage* (pp. 50-73). Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Kaufman, P. (2014, October 14). *Understanding Violence Sociologically.* Retrieved November 8, 2017, from Everyday Sociology Blog: http://www.everydaysociologyblog.com/2014/10/understanding-violence-sociologically.html

Lang, N. (2013, September 30). *These 45 Shockingly Sexist Vintage Ads Will Make You Glad To Live In 2013*. Retrieved February 16, 2018, from Thought Catalog: https://thoughtcatalog.com/nico-lang/2013/09/these-45-shockingly-sexist-vintage-ads-will-make-you-glad-to-live-in-2013/

LaPiere, R. T., & Farnsworth, P. R. (1936). *Social Psychology.* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

Larner, C. (1981). *Enemies of God. The Witch-Hunt in Scotland.* London: Chatto and Windus.

Levi-Strauss, C. (1969). *The Raw and the Cooked. Introduction to a Science of Mythology: I.* London: Jonathan Cape.

Lodrick, D. O., & Das, H. (2015). *Assam.* Retrieved March 18, 2018, from Encyclopaedia Britannica: https://www.britannica.com/place/Assam

Lyons, M. (1999). New Readers in the Nineteenth Century: Women, Children, Workers. In G. Cavallo, & R. Chartier (Eds.), *A History of Reading in the West* (L. G. Cochrane, Trans., pp. 313- 344). Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. Retrieved from https://www.library.illinois.edu/spx/readcult/Blog/Lyons.pdf

Mallick, A. (2008). Witch-hunting in 1857. *Economic and Political Weekly, 43*(39), 118-119.

Marshall, T. (1995). *Man's Greatest Fear: The Final Phase of Human Evolution.* Gilroy, CA: Athena.

Mauss, M. (1973). Techniques of the Body. *Economy and Society*, 70-88. Retrieved March 15, 2015, from https://monoskop.org/images/c/c4/Mauss_Marcel_1935_1973_Techniques_of_the_Body.pdf

Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, Self and Society.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Menon, R., & Bhasin, K. (1998). *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition.* New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Menon, V. (2018, January 18). *52% Indian women think it's okay for their husbands to beat them. Only 42% men agree*. Retrieved June 5, 2018, from The Print: https://theprint.in/governance/more-women-than-men-think-wife-beating-is-justified/29808/

Miller, S. L. (1994). Expanding the Boundaries: Toward a More Inclusive and Integrated Study of Intimate Violence. *Violence and Victims Volume:9 Issue:2 Dated:special issue (Summer 1994) Pages:, 9*(2), 183-194.

Mosher, D., & Tomkins, S. S. (1988). Scripting the Macho Man: Hypermasculine Socialization and Enculturation. *Journal of Sex Research, 25*, 60-84.

Mulvey, L. (1999). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In L. Braudy, & M. Cohen (Eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism : Introductory Readings* (pp. 833-844). New York: Oxford University Press.

Mutero, J. (1999, July 11). Sunday Nation.

Nandy, A. (2009). *The Intimate Enemy Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Narayana, G. (1996). Family Violence, Sex and Reproductive Health Behaviour among Men in Uttar Pradesh, India. *Article Presented at the National Council for International Health Conference.* Crystal City, Virginia.

Nath, S. K. (2011). *The World of Assamese Folktales.* Guwahati: Bhabani Prints and Publications.

Neikirk, A. (2009). "...Happily Ever After: Or What Fairytales Teach Girls About Being Women". *Hohonu.* Retrieved May 23, 2016, from https://hilo.hawaii.edu/campuscenter/hohonu/volumes/documents/Vol07x07HappilyEverAfter.pdf

Noyes, D. (2012). The Social Base of Folklore. In R. F. Bendix, & G. Hasan-Rokem (Eds.), *A Companion to Folklore* (pp. 13-39). Place of publication not identified: Wiley-Blackwell.

Nussbaum, M. C. (2005). Women's Bodies: Violence, Security,. *Journal of Human Development, 6*(No. 2), 167-183. doi:10.1080/14649880500120509

Oakley, A. (1972). *Sex, Gender and Society.* London: Temple Smith.

Ong, N. (1984). Orality, Literacy and Medieval Textualization. *New Literary History, 16*(1), 1-12.

Place of Women in Assamese Society and their Representation in Assamese Folk Genre. (2017). Retrieved January 16, 2017, from Shodhganga: http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/97339/9/09_chapter%203.pdf

PLD, AMSS, & NEN. (2014). *Witch Hunting in Assam: Individual, Structural and Legal Dimensions.* Retrieved June 8, 2018, from http://www.northeastnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Witch_Hunting_in_Assam_Individual_Struct.pdf

Propp, V. (2009). *Morphology of the Folktale.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Raby, D. (2007). The Cave-Dwellers' Treasure: Folktales, Morality, and Gender in a Nahua Community in Mexico. *The Journal of American Folklore, 120*(478), 401-444.

Raheja, G. G., & Gold, A. G. (1996). *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India.* Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Madrass: Oxford University Press.

Sarkar, T. (1987). Nationalist Iconography: Image of Women in 19th Century Bengali Literature. *Economic and Political Weekly, 22*(47), 2011-2015.

Sayers, J. (1987). Melanie Klein, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism. *Feminist Review, Spring*(25), 23-37.

Schick, I. C. (2011). Print Capitalism and Women's Sexual Agency in the Late Ottoman Empire. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, 31*(1), 196-216. Retrieved May 5, 2018, from Academia: http://www.academia.edu/5717674/_Print_Capitalism_and_Women_s_Sexual_Agency_in_t he_Late_Ottoman_Empire_

Sinha, S. (2007). 1857: Witch-hunts, Adivasis and the Uprising in Chhotanagpur. *Economic and Political Weekly, 42*(19), 1672-1676.

Stith, S., & Farley, S. D. (1994). A Predictive Model of Male Spousal Violence. *Journal of Family Violence, 8*, 183-201.

Stroller, R. (1968). *Sex and Gender.* New York : Aronson.

Sydie, R. A. (1987). *Natural Women, Cultured Men: A Feminist Perspective on Sociological Theory.* Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

The 10 most sexist adverts ever. (n.d.). Retrieved February 16, 2018, from Gentleman's Journal: https://www.thegentlemansjournal.com/the-10-most-sexist-advertisements-ever/

Thomson, E. A. (2008). *Representations of Women in Six Japanese Folktales.* University of Wollongong Research Online.

Uberoi, P. (2006). *Freedom nd Destiny. Gender, Family and Popular Culture in India.* Oxford University Press.

Violence. (2017). Retrieved August 23, 2017, from American Psychological Association: http://www.apa.org/topics/violence/index.aspx

Violence. (2018). Retrieved June 10, 2018, from Merriam-Webster: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/violence

Walby, S. (2002). Gender, Class and Stratification. Towards a New Approach. In S.Jackson, & S. Scott, *Gender: A Sociological Reader* (pp. 93-96). New York, London: Routledge.

Weber, M. (1968). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology.* New York: Bedminster Press.

Whiting, B., & Edwards, C. P. (1973). A Cross Cultural Analysis of Sex Difference in the Behaviour of Children Aged Three Through Eleven. *Journal of Social Psychology, 91*, 171-188.

APPENDIX I

Source: Thought Catalog

Source: Gentleman's Journal

Source: Thought Catalog

Source: Thought Catalog

Source: Thought Catalog

Source: Thought Catalog

Source: Thought Catalog

Source: Thought Catalog

Source: Thought Catalog

Source: Gender Focus

Source: Thought Catalog

Source: Thought Catalog

Source: Gentleman's Journal

APPENDIX II

Tejimola

There lived a rich merchant who has two wives. The first wife gave birth to a daughter but died soon after. The young girl was called Tejimola, who was brought up by the second wife who was childless. Being unable to bear any children of her own, she was jealous of the love that her husband showered upon his only daughter. She detested Tejimola but looked after her in order to please her husband. She also feared that her husband will punish her if she didn't take care of Tejimola. Once the merchant got Tejimola to befriend the daughter of one of the well-established families in the village, a girl roughly her own age.

A few years later, the merchant had gone away for a few months to distant lands on business and the step-mother saw this as an opportunity to get her revenge on Tejimola. She planned on hurting or even killing the girl so that she could have all the gold and valuables owned by her husband to herself. Meanwhile Tejimola was invited to attend her friend's wedding and be a part of the extended wedding celebrations. So, her step-mother gave her a beautiful set of clothes and warned her not to spoil it because it was the step-mother's family heirloom. She packed up the clothes and told Tejimola to wear them when she reached the venue and not spoil them by wearing them during the journey. The woman, however concealed a mouse in one of the folds and some embers in another. When Tejimola opened the package at her friend's place, she was horrified to see the tattered clothes. When she returned home, the step-mother made an issue out of the whole incident, got enraged and dragged her to the 'dheki'. She broke all of Tejimola's limbs, one by one, by pounding on the *dheki* and finally she crushed her head and killed her. She buried Tejimola's body under the eaves and when anybody would enquire about Tejimola, she resorted to lies to cover up the crime.

Through a lot of magical interventions, Tejimola grew first into a gourd plant, then a pomelo tree, and then a lotus flower and each time she told a stranger her story, the plant was cut down by her step-mother and thrown away and she grew into the next plant. The third time, her father came across her in the form of a lotus while returning from business and as he reached out to pick a flower, Tejimola again told her story. This time Tejimola got resurrected in her human form through magic and told her father the truth and hence, as punishment he banished the cruel step-mother from the household and the society. (Bezborua, Burhi Air Xadhu, 1990)

Champawatir Xadhu (Champawati's Tale)

A man had two wives, the elder one of them was his favourite. Both the wives had a daughter each. Champawati the daughter of the younger one went to the paddy fields and sang to the birds to scare them away from the paddy. As she sang, there was a response from the forest nearby that said "*I shall have paddy, rice too. Having married Champawati I shall go home*". So, this duet went on. The girl reported the matter to her mother. Learning of it her father went to the field and promised to give his daughter's hand in marriage to whoever comes out of the forest. A large python appeared and the unkind father gave Champawati to the snake. The snake and the girl were made to live together and the next morning Champawati was found decorated with lovely jewels and ornaments. The snake was not found.

The elder wife of the man got jealous at this fortune of her stepdaughter's and forced her husband to procure a snake for her daughter too. At night the snake began to swallow its bride. The latter cried out that her feet tickle and her mother (who was outside listening) responded that her husband was putting anklets on her feet; she cried out that her waist tickled and her mother responded that the son-in-law was putting a skirt around her; she cried out that her breasts tickle and her mother responded that the son-in-law was winding the breast-cloth around her breasts; she cried out that her neck tickles and her mother responded that her son-in-law was tying jewels on her neck. Then there was silence.

The next morning the truth was discovered and the snake was killed. The man and his elder wife wanted to slay Champawati and her mother but Champawati's husband, the snake swallowed them up and took Champawati and her mother into the forest. They live happily in a palace.

After her mother's death a beggar woman told Champawati that her husband was a god in disguise and when he went out at night leaving his snake covering she was to burn it. When he writhed in pain she was to fan him and apply oil on him. Champawati did as directed and found her husband to be a very handsome man. A few days later the beggar woman directed her to have rice in the same dish as her husband for this will increase his love for her. Further, after the meal she was instructed to tell him that she had glimpsed some villages in his mouth and she now wants him to open his mouth wider, so that she may see the entire world. At her words he would get angry and going into the river he will ask her "what do you want—me or to see the world?" She was supposed to reply: "I want to see the world." At this he will open his mouth and show her the world but being angry he will declare that he was going away for six years, but she should not be afraid for he will not leave her. Champawati did as directed and

her husband asks her from the middle of the river: "what do you want?" She replied, I want you as well as to see the world." Her husband showed her the world and then giving her a ring, he said, "That beggar woman who advises you is a maid of my mother, a demon. My mother wishes to eat you. But this (throwing a ring towards her) will protect you and with its aid you will be able to see me after six years at my mother's place." He then disappeared. At the end of six years Champawati went out in search of her husband and found him in his mother's house. Husband and wife live happily but Champawati's ring left her as soon as she contacted her husband.

One day her demoness mother-in-law sent her to another demoness with a letter in which was written: "slay her and send me a share of the flesh." As Champawati was about to leave her husband stopped her from behind, took away the letter and out of vexation killed his mother. (Bezborua, Burhi Air Xadhu, 1990)

Chilanir Jiyekar Xadhu (Tale of the Kite's Daughter)

A baby girl was abandoned by her mother because her husband threatened that he will sell her off if she gave birth to another girl child. A kite (bird) found the baby, brought her up as her own child on the branches of a tree. She grew up to become a very pretty maiden. The kite taught her a song and told her that she should sing the song whenever she needed any help and the kite-mother will arrive to assist her.

One day a handsome and wealthy merchant travelling for business sat down beneath the tree to rest for a while and a strand of the kite's daughter's beautiful long hair fell on him. He looked up and was surprised to see the girl. He asked her questions but the girl couldn't reply out of fear of a stranger. She sang the song and the kite arrived and answered all the questions. The merchant told her that he already had seven wives but falling in love with 'Chilanir jiyek' (the kite's daughter), he wanted to marry her with the kite's permission.

The co-wives became jealous of the new bride and created difficulties for her and tested her abilities in household chores like weaving and cooking. But each time she called out in secret to her kite mother for help. The kite mother appeared and helped her out, magically performing the tasks each time. In time, the co-wives came to know the secret and tricked the kite into appearing before them while the daughter was not around, killed the kite, tried to feed its meat to the daughter and when she refused, they planned to sell her to a trader.

Later when the husband went away for business, the co-wives of the girl made a deal with a tradesman and he kidnapped her. When the husband returned to find that his favourite wife was missing, he set out to find her. She was made to work on the river bank, drying fish for the tradesman's business, where she used to sing her life-story. The merchant found her singing her story, learnt the truth and as a punishment, commanded the senior wives to walk on a thread stretched across a pit full of spikes. Six of them fall to their death, while the seventh escaped because she was innocent and did not plot to sell the kite's daughter. So, the merchant lived happily with the kite's daughter and his other (innocent) wife. (Bezborua, Burhi Air Xadhu, 1990)

Mekurir Jiyekar Xadhu (Tale of the Cat's Daughter)

Once the cat living in the household and the mistress of the household were both pregnant at the same time. The cat told the mistress that she had a desire to eat fish and the mistress asked the cat to go and get some so that she could cook for both of them. The cat procured some fish and the woman cooked it, but she ate all the fish and gave the bones only to the cat. The cat felt hurt and cursed the woman saying "Whatever is in my womb will go to yours and whatever is in yours will come to mine".

In due time, the woman birthed two kittens while the cat birthed twin daughters. The cat brought up the daughters with utmost love and care. One day they asked her how they would know if someone killed their cat-mother while she was out looking for milk and fish for them. So, the cat gave them a *tulosi* plant and some milk in a container and told them if that if she died the plant will droop and the milk will turn black. This happened after a few days and the distressed girls went looking for their mother. The younger one became thirsty and the elder one went to a river to get some water. The water spirit asked for her ring in exchange for some water. When she returned for some more water the water spirit carried her away. The younger sister was left alone and she cried bitterly.

A merchant passing by, saw her and took her with him. He already had two wives and made the cat's daughter his third. The elder wives were jealous of the new bride. So, when she bore a son, they covered her eyes, took the child away to the river and announced that the baby was a flail. The second time she had a son, the co-wives did the same thing again and announced that she had borne a pumpkin.

However, the elder daughter of the cat, now the wife of the river spirit, took care of the boys. The trader was convinced by his elder wives that the third wife was evil and unlucky and so she bore weird things instead of children. So, the merchant drove her out of the house and she lived in a shack nearby. Once when the merchant was sailing, the water spirit trapped his ship mid-river and asked him for his *hasoti* and cane and throw a feast on a specified date in exchange for safe passage. The merchant agreed and is let to pass. On the day of the feast, the two boys arrived at the merchant's house with his hasoti and cane given to them by their uncle, the water spirit. They told the gathering the entire story and later the merchant punished the elder wives by cutting off their noses and ears and throwing them out of the house. He lived happily thereafter, with his third wife and two sons. (Bezborua, Burhi Air Xadhu, 1990)

Tula aru Teja (Tula and Teja)

A rich farmer had two wives; the younger one was his favourite. The elder wife had a daughter named Teja and a son named Kanai. The younger wife had a daughter named Tula. Once, the co-wives went fishing. The younger one pushed the elder into the water, muttering: "As a big tortoise may you stay." Later, the tortoise revealed herself to her children and gave them food every day. They became healthy and strong. Their step mother observed this and came to know the truth from her daughter who accompanied Teja and Kanai. The stepmother then feigned illness and told her husband through an old lady physician that she will be cured if she was fed on tortoise flesh.

The tortoise mother came to know this. She told her children that they should not eat the flesh and must bury her legs and bone on the banks of the tank. Two trees, bearing flowers and fruits of exquisite beauty and taste, grew at the spot. The produce of the trees was in great demand. Kanai refused to give the fruits and flowers to the king unless he promised to marry his sister. The king, seeing the beauty of Teja married her. After the marriage Teja is faced with the jealousy of the king's elder wife. The co-wife used to create problems for her from the very beginning. She was guided by her old lady servant. But the king was always kind to Teja. At Teja's happiness her stepmother grew more jealous. One day she invited Teja to come to her place and after a few days she pushed a thorn into her head and turned her into a myna. Her step sister put on her dress and went to king's home as per her mother's advice. The myna followed her. Tula was almost a look-alike of Teja; so, the king was unable to recognize her. The myna tried to tell him the truth one day he overheard her and asked the bird to alight on

his shoulder. The bird flies to him and the king, finding a thorn in its head, pulled it out and Teja appeared in her real shape. Then the king killed the imposter and cut her into pieces and sent them to her scheming mother[6]. (Bezborua, Burhi Air Xadhu, 1990).

Numoliya Po (The Youngest Son)

A couple have a son born to them quite late in their lives and the husband goes to the astrologer to find an appropriate name for the child. The astrologer tells him that the suitable name is 'Nomal' and the old man for fear of forgetting the name kept repeating it on his way back home. While repeating the name, he changes the word thrice by mistake and each time the people he encounters on the way take it as insults to them and the old man gets beaten up on three occasions. And as a result of the beatings he forgets the name by the time he reaches home. But at home his wife utters the word *numoliya*- which sounds similar to 'Nomal'- during their conversation, and the old man remembers the name immediately. However, he gets angry at his wife and thrashes her mercilessly saying that if she had known the name all along, she should not have sent him on this dangerous errand. (Bezborua, Burhi Air Xadhu, 1990)

Burha Burhiye Bogori Guti Rowa (The Old Couple's Planting of a Jujube seed)

An old couple planted a jujube tree and appointed a bird to look after the tree. One day the king's men tried to pluck some of its fruits while passing by, but the bird attacked them and blinded some of them while performing its duty. However, the bird was captured and the king took it to his seven wives and instructed them to cook it for his dinner. The bird being a clever one escaped by fooling the women. So, the king's wives cooked him some frog's meat instead. The king didn't realize this and enjoyed his meal. But the next morning the bird returned to mock the king and told him what happened. He summoned his wives and interrogated them. All the women except the youngest one lied to the king, and so the king ordered the six women to death by being trampled by elephants. (Bezborua, Kaka Deuta Aru Nati Lora, 1913)

---

[6] In some versions of this story, there is an element of cannibalism where the parents unknowingly eat their daughter Tula's flesh, only to realise it later.

Lubhuni (The Greedy Woman)

Once a thief while waiting to steal from a household peeked into the house through an aperture in the wall and saw the housewife secretly eating fish while cooking. He didn't like the conduct of the greedy woman, so he poked her cheek with a stick through the aperture and injured her. The wound gradually deteriorated and so the husband called medicine-man to cure her and incidentally the medicine-man happened to be the same thief who caused the injury. In his incantations he said things about secretly eating fish and getting cheek injuries. The family members asked about the meaning of his incantations and the told them how the woman had got injured. They reprimanded her for her behaviour and she promised to never repeat such behaviour. But gradually she fell back on her promise and continued to steal and eat food. Her mother-in-law, fed up of such behaviour, decided to kill her. So, she got some fish, cooked it, had her meal then mixed some live leeches into the remaining fish curry, kept it aside and went about her chores. The greedy woman ate some of the fish and fish curry while the mother-in-law was not around, and unknowingly ingesting the live leeches. She fell terribly ill and so, her mother was called to take her to her natal home for recuperation. On the way her mother fed her some *sandah* that she was carrying and made her daughter rest a while by using the remaining *sandah* packet as a pillow. The leeches smelt the *sandah* and came out of her mouth. The mother saw this and made her drink cucumber juice to kill any remaining leeches inside her. she soon recovered and returned to her husband's house. She had learnt her lesson the hard way and she gave up her greedy habits. (Baruani, Sandhiyar Sadhu, 1937)

Kulakhyoni Tirota (The Woman with Evil Signs)

Once there lived a very good-natured widow who had a son. They loved and cared for each other very much. When the son came of age, his mother got him married but still continued to help with the household chores like cleaning the fish and vegetables for the daughter-in-law to cook. The daughter-in-law however, was not happy with the devotion of her husband towards his mother and she used to serve very little fish to the old woman, while saving the bigger portions for herself and her husband. So, the mother-in-law would ask her on occasions that she would like to eat the fish head. But the daughter-in-law didn't heed her requests. So, the old woman reminded her saying "Did you forget about what I had said, dear?" this went on for quite some time and the son, on hearing this from his mother time and again asked his wife what his mother was referring to. The wife lied to him saying his mother wanted a man. This

ashamed the son a lot, and so, on the pretext of taking her to visit his maternal uncle, he took his mother with him and left her in the middle of a forest, saying that his wife won't be able to fulfil her requests. As he was leaving, the sky rumbled with the indication of a thunder-storm. So, the mother said a quick prayer that her son reaches home safely and being unable to comprehend her own condition, lamented the situation for wanting to eat a fish-head. The son overheard her prayer and asked her what she meant. She told him everything and the son took her back home. He dragged his wife by the hair and threatened to kill her if she didn't confess. She confessed and chased her out of his house. Later he remarried and lived happily with his mother and new wife. (Baruani, Sandhiyar Sadhu, 1937)

Soropa Tirota (The Lazy Woman)

There was once a woman who was very lazy. She used to feign illness and shirk work, so her husband had to carry out all the household chores and work on the farm as well. He tried everything to make her feel better, but to no avail. The woman, however, would cook delicious dishes and enjoy them on her own while the husband was away for work. One day her husband finds out what she had been doing all along and he beats her up mercilessly. After that, she never feigned illness or shirked work ever again. (Baruani, Sandhiyar Sadhu, 1937).

Thupori (The Ugly/Unskilled Woman)

There lived a woman who was not good at weaving. But when she received a proposal for marriage, she lied to the prospective groom that she was an expert at weaving. They got married and the husband would often ask her to display her weaving skills, but she managed to get away with it somehow. However, one day when her secret is about to be exposed, she uses her wit to devise such a plan that the husband never again asks her to weave or display her weaving skills. (Baruani, Sandhiyar Sadhu, 1937)

Ow-Kuwori (The Ow-Princess)

The two wives of a king gave birth on the same day, the elder wife had a boy while the younger one had an *ow.* She was upset and threw the *ow* away, but it kept rolling back to her. A few years later, the *ow* rolled to the river bank at mid-day and a prince saw it. He watched as a

beautiful maiden emerged from the fruit, bathed in the river, got back into the fruit and rolled away. The prince returned home and told his parents that he wanted to marry the *ow* and demanded that they bring it to him. The parents tried to dissuade him from such a preposterous idea, but he was relentless. So, they got him married to the fruit but he was sad that the princess would not come out of it. However, he would leave a portion of his dinner aside every night for her and in the morning find it gone. But he was unable to bring her out of the fruit and meet her.

One day a beggar woman advised him on how to get his wife out of the fruit. He followed the advice accordingly and was able to retrieve her from the fruit and burn it, so that she would never go back into it again. Everyone was glad at this happy turn of events and the prince and the princess were married with great pomp and show. (Bezborua, Burhi Air Xadhu, 1990)

Paneshoi

One day a young boy found a duck's egg and brought it home to his mother. She placed it in the storage platform below the roof of their house and a beautiful maiden emerged out of it. She would come down from the attic when no one was home, eat the cold left-overs, cook fresh meals and go back to her hiding place. The woman observed this and wanted to know who was cooking for her every day. So, she made a plan and caught the girl red-handed. She adopted her as her own daughter and named her *Paneshoi*. But when the woman's son grew up he wanted to marry her. His mother came to know of his desire and to keep him happy began preparing for the wedding without telling Paneshoi that she was to be the bride. Paneshoi came to know about it from a beggar woman, who gave her directions to avoid this marriage. Paneshoi follows the advice and stays hidden in a number of different forms from a duck to a chip of wood for a long time. But eventually a young man following another beggar woman's advice finds her and marries her. (Bezborua, Burhi Air Xadhu, 1990)

Kanchani

There lived a young man who was turned into a dog by an old beggar woman. But due to certain circumstances, a beautiful young woman named Kanchani was married to him by her parents. She was a docile and obedient wife and entirely devoted to her dog-husband. He later transformed into his human form and they started living happily. But the king hears about the

good qualities and beauty of Kanchani and wanted to marry her. So, he summoned her husband to the court and ordered him to give up his wife. He refused, and the king tortured and as he was about to die, Kanchani rushes to the torture chambers and she dies along with her husband from the same tortures as him. (Bezborua, Burhi Air Xadhu, 1990)

Lakhimi Tirota (The Woman with Lakshmi-like qualities)[7]

There was an old couple who had seven sons. When all of them got married, the old couple realised that the youngest daughter-in-law of the household was endowed with the characteristics of Lakshmi. So, on their death-bed, they asked all of their sons and daughters-in-law to abide by her instructions. The youngest daughter-in-law made it a rule that all the men had to bring something back home when they returned every day. Fed up of this rule, one of the brothers brought a dead snake home one day and put it on the fence in the front yard. He told the woman that he had brought something home and left it in the front yard. She saw the dead snake and said that it was alright that he was angry with her. But when she went to pick it up, she found a bundle of gold ornaments instead. The youngest daughter-in-law told the brother about the gold ornaments. Actually, a woman bathing in the river had left her gold ornaments in a bundle on the riverside. A kite had picked up the bundle thinking it was food. Therefore, it dropped the bundle in the front yard and took the dead snake instead. Many such incidents happened over time and the household prospered.

But one day a fakir used his magic to lead this extraordinary woman away. Soon after the household falls into ruin. The family members perished and only one child is left alive. The woman later comes across this wandering child and through the interventions of Lord Brahma and some supernatural occurrences the woman, her nephew and the daughter of Lord Brahma establish a prosperous household again. (Bezborua, Burhi Air Xadhu, 1990)

Sarabjan (The All-Knowing One)

Once there lived a farmer named Phoring who had a wife but no children. One day he told his wife that he wanted to eat *pitha,* but his wife said that there was no rice at home to make it. So, he used his wit and procured some rice with which his wife made a lot of *pitha,* while her

---

[7] This tale is more or less identical to the tale 'Randhani' by Troilokyeswari Devi Baruani

husband was asleep and she ate most of them. In the morning Phoring was surprised to see such less quantity of *pitha* but deduced from the marks on the bamboo platter that his wife must have eaten most of it. He made a rhyme to let her know that he knew about the *pitha* that she had eaten, she was surprised that her husband could see the past. She told her friends in the village about her husband's miraculous powers and he through a series of lucky guesses and coincidences he became popular as the 'all-knowing one'. When a theft occurred at the king's palace, he was summoned and asked to find the lost necklace. It had been stolen by the younger queen Hadoi but by coincidence and through sheer luck, he managed to convince the queen that he knew that she had stolen the necklace. The stolen necklace was retrieved when the queen out of fear of being punished agreed to follow Phoring's directions and return the necklace. Phoring was handsomely rewarded and he returned home a happy man. (Bezborua, Burhi Air Xadhu, 1990)

Maghor Bihu[8] (Bihu in the Month of Magh)

There was a woman who was married but had no blood relatives. One day a thief who wanted to dupe her mother-in-law visited them pretending to be a relative of the daughter-in-law. He asked to take her home to her relatives and through his clever talk outsmarted the old woman. She allowed this man to take her daughter-in-law away for a few days. But when the young woman arrived at the thief's den in the middle of the forest, she realised his plan of keeping her captive. She stayed on for a few days without compromising her integrity, engaged the thief and his mother in conversation and pretended to be enjoying the time spent with her new-found relatives, while planning an escape. When she got the chance, she escaped with a lot of the valuables that the thief had hoarded in his dwelling, got united with her family and got the thief and his gang arrested, thus proving her wit and courage. (Baruani, Sadhukatha, 1934).

Chaul Puriya (The Man Who Ate Huge Quantities of Rice)

There was a king who had eight daughters. One day he gathered them around and asked them to express how much they loved him. All the daughters except the youngest one compared their love for him to gold and jewels and the most expensive things. But the youngest daughter said

---

[8] This tale is similar to 'Kata Juwa Naak, Kharoni Di Dhaak' by Lakshminath Bezborua, except that the protagonist in this tale is more hands-on in her approach.

that she loved him more than salt. This enraged the king and so he married her off to a poor and ungroomed woodcutter who lived near the woods and who would eat huge quantities of rice and not make much of his life. The elder princesses were married off to wealthy merchants, princes and kings. The young princess, through her smartness and thrift transformed the household of the woodcutter and was also able to transform her husband's looks and physique.

Years later when the king was passing by the woods, he came across the small but well-kept home of the woodcutter and decided to rest there for a while. He did not recognize the woodcutter because of his transformation. The woodcutter offered some lunch cooked by his wife to the king, and the king accepted. But when he put the food in his mouth he found it salt-less and hence tasteless. Then his daughter, the woodcutter's wife stepped out of the kitchen and explained to him why years ago, she had compared her love for him to salt. The king realised his folly and gets reunited with his smartest daughter. (Baruani, Sadhukatha, 1934).

Bhusung Pohu (The Laughing Stock)

There was once a king's minister who was imprisoned by the king for his inability to tell the difference between a male and a female fish. So, the minister's son left home with a pair of slippers and an umbrella in hand to find a way to get his father released. On the way he met a farmer who invited him to his home. The farmer was surprised by this young man's strange behaviour of opening the umbrella while walking under the shade of trees and closing it otherwise or wearing his footwear while walking in the mud but carrying them in his hand otherwise. When they reached the farmer's home, the farmer told his wife and daughter about the strange young man. His daughter, who was herself a very smart woman, understood the reasons for the young man's otherwise strange behaviour and explained it to her father. Soon after the minister's son finds out how smart this young woman is and after he tells the farmer and his family about his father's condition, the farmer's daughter offered to help. The minister's son and the farmer's daughter get married. Then she devised a plan and the minister's son acting according to the plan and made the king realise that his demands and whims were not rational and that it made him the laughing stock of the people around. The king then released the minister and they lived happily ever after. (Bezborua, Burhi Air Xadhu, 1990).