



ISSN : 2350-1189

AURORA

Volume-IX, 2020
(Peer Reviewed)

**JOURNAL OF
WOMEN'S STUDIES
AND DEVELOPMENT**

Editors :

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**CELL FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES AND DEVELOPMENT
D.D.R. COLLEGE, CHABUA, DIBRUGARH**

Portrayal of Stepmother in Children's Literature With special reference to *Burhi-aair Xadhu*

Mayuri Sharma Baruah

Abstract

*There is no denial that in a patriarchal structure the various images of women are drafted and designed by men. Till date the notion of an 'independent' woman is neither understood nor accepted by a larger section of the society. The presence of a 'male protector' (in forms of father, husband, son etc) in a woman's life was considered inevitable in the past and some still believe it as essential. Accordingly, the various roles of a woman throughout her lifetime have been neatly arranged. A mother has to be loving, caring, and sacrificing – precisely she stands as the epitome of love. On the contrary, a stepmother is seen as a cruel hearted and cunning woman. And mostly such models of stepmothers are available in children's literature. We have some ill-known stepmothers in global literature too; namely, the stepmothers of Cinderella, Snow-white, Hansel and Gretel etc. However, in this study an attempt was made to discuss Lakshminath Bezbaroa's famous collection of short stories in Assamese for children *Burhi-aair Xadhu*. Perhaps there's no Assamese who has not read it with wonder and awe in his/her childhood days. The main objective is to re-read this collection, especially some of its stories, from a gender perspective to fathom the influence exerted by patriarchy in the Assamese society of the past. The present study aims at focusing the portrayal of stepmothers in these stories and tracing its impact, both short and long term, on human psychology.*

Key Words: Children, Cruelty, Patriarchy, Polygamy, Stepmother.

Introduction :

The negative image of a stepmother has always scared us in our childhood years. We used to shudder at the thought of the presence of one such in our own lives. Whenever we were somewhat undisciplined and disobedient, our mothers used to frighten us by praying God to replace them by sending a stepmother - an ultimate blow to our innocent minds which was an effective remedial measure too. Is

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a stepmother so bad? Or is it convenient for society to portray her in such a horrible manner – as a contrast to a biological mother? Who is responsible for such negative projection? Usually, in most items of folk literature, the step-mother motif is used in such events when the children have lost their own mother. The stock image of a step-mother is of one who favours her biological offspring and is very cruel towards her step-children. Our objective is to trace out the probable reasons behind such inhuman or unwomanly behaviour of a woman who although stepmother, is a mother after all. Despite advancement of time and progress in our thinking, the status of a stepmother is still deplorable. One cannot ignore the probable involvement of patriarchal psychology in it. The neatly calculated roles of a woman in different phases of her life strongly indicate the dominance of a man's world. In this context, we have selected Bezbaroa's *Burhi-aair Xadhu* as a sample to study the character of a stepmother as depicted in some of the stories, namely, "Tejeemola", "Tula aru Teja" and "Champawati".

Objective

The main objective of this study is to discuss Laksminath Bezbaroa's famous collection of short stories from a gender perspective to fathom the influence exerted by patriarchy in the Assamese society of the past.

Methodology

This analytical study is based on secondary data collected from various sources like Lakshminath Bezbaroa's famous collection of stories *Burhi Aair Xadhu* and from various journals.

Discussion

The first and foremost stepmother whose cruelty still continues to haunt us is Tejeemola's stepmother in the story "Tejeemola". This lady was issueless and yet she didn't or couldn't tolerate Tejeemola's presence in her life. The young girl's entire life gets shattered due to her stepmother. In fact, she stands a victim of the wicked stepmother's evil design. The manner in which her stepmother crushed

her unto death is horrifying for anybody. In the story ultimately her evil deed was unveiled and the stepmother got her due punishment. Undoubtedly, “Tejeemola’s stepmother remains the worst representative of a stepmother forever.” (Sharma Baruah, 2013)

Again, the stepmother of Teja and Kanai of “Tula aru Teja” is another illustration of a typical stepmother. This story too showcases the brutality of a stepmother towards her stepchildren. This lady has a girl child and is the *lagee* (useful) wife. She was in a comfortable position in comparison to the *elagee* (neglected) co-wife. But that could not soften her heart and she starts plotting against her rival. Once she was out of her way, she targets the children and starts maltreating them. Here also the real mother turned turtle comes to their help which irritates the stepmother. She turns her best to make their lives miserable and succeeds too, to some extent. However, she receives her lot of punishment when she feeds on her own daughter’s flesh.

On the other hand, the story of Champawati differs slightly from the above two stories. In her case, the fragile presence of the biological mother highlights the domineering role of the *lagee* co-wife. Unlike Tejeemola, Champawati happens to have an indifferent and uncaring father who is a close associate in the wicked plan of the stepmother. That indeed, is an advantage for the stepmother who could play a decisive role in marrying her off to a serpent. However, Champawati was fortunate enough to survive since the serpent was a human in disguise. Again, regarding the punishment for evil intention and action, this stepmother too, suffers. Champawati’s fortune enhances the stepmother’s greed and she let her own daughter to marry another serpent, this time a real one. The outcome is obvious – the poor girl is eaten up by her husband.

We’ve grown with these stories and the characters still stay alive in our minds. As children we cried with these kids and felt happy when the wicked stepmothers had received punishment. But with maturity in age and understanding, we **empathize** with both –

- (a) the kids as immediate and obvious victims and
- (b) their respective stepmothers as perpetual and shielded victims of a powerful social system.

Thus, we condemn the rudeness in their behaviour but on a parallel level we make an effort to trace the cause of such brutality as depicted in these stories. Let us arrange the **probable factors** working behind as thus:

First of all, perhaps it is a **sense of insecurity** which affects the stepmother's behavioural pattern motivating her to indulge in inhuman deeds. "The prevalence of polygamy heightens the insecurity of a married woman." (Sharma Baruah, 2013) As designed by patriarchy, a stepmother has to be wicked and vindictive and is by no means supposed to replace the biological mother. The immediate question that crops up is whether a young girl of the past had any choice of her own to be a stepmother. If so, society was always there to contaminate her innocence by imposing the preconceived notions of stepmotherhood. The shadow of patriarchy thus darkens the mind of a woman who loses her rationality and commits heinous crimes.

Now in case of Tejeemola's stepmother we feel that the fear of discardment by her husband paralyses her mind so strongly that she ends up throwing Tejimola out of her life. It may be noted that in the Assamese novel *Tejeemolar Maakor Xadhu (Tale of Tejeemola's Mother)*, the author Mridul Sharma has vividly portrayed a patriarchal background which had directly or indirectly instigated and pushed Tejeemola's stepmother to that dreadful situation.

On the other hand, Teja's stepmother was continually threatened by the presence of a co-wife. Her fear of being dethroned resulted in all the consecutive evil actions.

Similarly, Champawati's stepmother was alarmed by the existence though insignificant, of her co-wife. Her added benefit was a husband who had no good will towards the 'other wife'. Yet the very fact that Champawati was victimized only because she was a step-child substantiates our supposition. Thus, the clear-

cut societal division of a biological offspring and a step-child plays a decisive role in all the above situations.

The patriarchal system deviously pollutes the mind of an innocent woman transforming her into a criminal. Here works **the concept of husband as a protector in a woman's life**. If we look back, we find that women of the past were both economically and socially much behind men and hence they required male assistance to move forward. Without the light of education their reasoning was greatly influenced by man's world. For such a woman security and happiness meant lifelong support of her husband. As bigamy and polygamy were prevalent in society, a woman always felt insecure of her position in her husband's life. The presence of a co-wife enhances the insecurity of any married woman. Likewise, a stepmother felt insecure by the existence of stepchildren in her life. No doubt, a *lagee* or favoured wife avails a comfortable upper berth in the domestic power hierarchy. But the very transient nature of that position doesn't enable her to relax and enjoy that status. Whatever the situation is, the decisive part is always played by the owner/possessor who is obviously a man; this proves that man could not only literally possess a woman; he could even trespass into her psychology. This in fact, can be the **driving factor** of cruelty displayed by a stepmother in all these situations.

Secondly, the **myth** of stepmother as a wicked woman is internalized by generations through oral tradition. Surprisingly, in most cases, the narrator happens to be a woman. The title of the text used for this study **Burhi-Aair Xadhu** (Grandma's Tales) is illustrative of this observation. The humble acceptance of the patriarchal values by the womenfolk thus, eases the task of a society with patriarchal lenience. No one raises a voice against the stock image of a stepmother; rather the recurrence of that image in the stories authenticates the myth. But can we agree to that opinion? Don't we have mothers who are cruel and unkind to their own children? Here, we may refer to the story *Silanir Jiyekor Xadhu (The Tale of the Kite's Daughter)* incorporated in this collection where the newborn child is abandoned by its own mother, whatever the reason be. When we look at the

mythological character of Kunti, we witness how baby Karna, her first child was deserted by her. The way a biological mother's emotions and actions are guided by patriarchy (gender discrimination and motherhood out of wedlock, respectively); one can easily comprehend the influence of the existent system in moulding the negative character of a stepmother. Even in real life we come across, unmotherly mothers; e.g., Charles Dickens, a famous Victorian novelist suffered throughout his life due to the presence of an incompetent and insensitive mother. The presence of orphans, incompetent mothers and subsequently the portrayal of motherly figures in most of his novels validate his intense personal grief. Now the question that arises is if this be the fact, then why should the image of a stepmother remain maligned till eternity? Exceptions exist everywhere – there are stepmothers who sacrifice the bliss of motherhood solely for rearing their stepchildren. Hence, we may infer that the **stock image of a stepmother is merely a myth which is not grounded firmly.**

Shifting to the topic of portrayal of stepmother in children's literature, we come across a question – how far is such portrayal justified? With reference to the functions of the folktales, Srimati R. Grace Lewison observed in J.A.S. (Journal of Asiatic Society) of Bengal, 1939, “The more common ones seem to be used for discipline to remind a child of the dire consequences of such unwise actions.” (Goswami, 1980, page xiv) With reference to the stories discussed above, this observation is justified – as the stepmothers receive punishment. However, in doing so the character of a stepmother is slandered. Children usually crave for love and affection irrespective of the person who showers love on them. In that context, why was a stepmother projected as a villain even in such stories for children? The interesting part of the entire game is that a child has no role to play in the remarriage of its father. Is it so that a man was warned against bigamy or remarriage (after his wife's death) through these stories? We may opine that in the patriarchal setting a woman/ stepmother is victimized – her negative portrayal in literature is simply to assert male dominance. **Certainly the non-existence of a 'stepfather' in reality and also in literature helped in heightening a stepmother's villainy.** But we

observe a contrasting scenario in our neighbouring state Meghalaya which is traditionally matrilineal. The Noh-Ka-Likai Falls of Cherapunjee has a painful history of its own. It is said that a young woman named Likai who had a daughter from her earlier marriage had married for a second time. Her second husband loathed his step-daughter. One day he killed the poor girl and cooked her flesh which was served to the mother on her return from the fields. Likai ate the meal without suspicion. She later discovered her daughter's fingers in the betel nut basket. Distraught with grief and remorse, Likai rushes to the nearby cliffs and threw herself over the precipice adjoining the waterfalls. To commemorate her tragedy, hereafter the fall is known as Noh-Ka-Likai meaning the Leap of Likai. This illustrates how profoundly an existent social system can influence the psychology of its population. The step-father's brutal behaviour is nothing but an outcome of jealousy and insecurity that he inherits from the matrilineal system.

Conclusion :

These three samples of stepmother are not unique in literature; in many of the stories of North-east we come across similar portrayal. Again, when we make a broader survey, to name a few, we find the cruel stepmothers of Cinderella, Hansel-Gretel and Snow-white. This is a clear indicator of our observation that irrespective of time and location, the negative image of a stepmother has been subtly used by the stakeholders of patriarchy to petrify mankind. The inclusion of stepmother motif in children's literature thus helps in intensifying fear and aversion in the innocent minds of upcoming generations. These texts transmit the patriarchal tradition from one generation to another by contaminating the innocent and fresh minds of children. The target group in this matter being children there is a strong possibility that a young boy would adopt the typical male arrogance and likewise a young girl, the submissive nature. This indeed, may be a threat to a society and contemporary history when people are struggling for either abolition or modification of patriarchal concepts and desperately looking forward to a gender friendly environment. And we may observe that the negative stereotype of a stepmother is conveniently used in literature, both

oral and written to highlight the humble submission of womenfolk towards patriarchy. The psychological impact can be well understood from the common derogatory view about a stepmother. Lack of appreciation from any quarter for the dedicated, devoted and sacrificing stepmothers substantiates this observation. In the context of the modern western societies, step-families are in abundance. And researches have shown how stressed stepmothers are due to a number of factors. However, in our societies it is almost rare – but in near future we may face similar situations. It may be so that the continuation of such segregation among womenfolk is somehow convenient for pursuing the patriarchal ideology.

We firmly believe that the negative image of a stepmother is the brainchild of a society steeped into patriarchal ideology. It highlights the brutality of a woman tagged as stepmother with a view to repress the womenfolk only. The villainous portrayal of a stepmother has significance only for her step-children and co-wives, if any. Men have nothing to worry because they view themselves as protectors and not vice-versa. As Manashi Borah (2008) maintains “it is seen that gender roles in Assamese folk tales are basically generated by values of patriarchy, and the morals these tales convey consolidate the patriarchal world order.” To sum up, the brutality of stepmothers as depicted and recorded in children’s literature does serve a shrewd purpose – in a subtle and effortless manner patriarchy is handed over to the upcoming generations

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ISSN : 2277-5277



Est. 1930

Srotaswini

Peer-Reviewed Biennial Bilingual Research Journal
Vol- III, 2017



Joint Editors
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Conflict Situation: An Ordeal for Survival and Dignity On Reading Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*

Mayuri Sharma Baruah

"...the important thing to realise is that this is not an issue that permits us to focus on prostitution in isolation from the economic situation of women in a society generally."
(Mudgal 87)

Introduction :

Usually accepted with much reverence, autobiographies of great people are seen as motivational documents. Citing Pascal, Ramakrishnan states that earlier theories of autobiography saw this genre as 'a shaping of the past', imposing 'a pattern on a life' and constructing out of it 'a coherent story'. (Ramakrishnan 2011) But newer theories consider autobiography as the 'shaping of self itself since the acts of narration involves the political acts of self-assertion and self-creation.' (Ramakrishnan 2011) In fact, the very act of writing marks a moment of self-discovery. As we study the history of autobiography and biography, the trend of recording and documenting the lives of people belonging to the mainstream becomes apparent. The life history of an individual, glued to his/her peripheral status probably found no space in such documentation. Likewise, a closer look at the historical timeline exposes a dearth in the biographies of women compared to that of men. M. K. Naik, in his *A History of Indian English Literature* enlists six women autobiographers during the years of 1920 -1947 among whom two were Nehru's sisters and the others were namely, the Maharani of Cooch Behar, Cornelia Sorabji, the novelist Santha Rama Rau and Isvani, a Khoja Muslim. This list clearly shows how women from a higher status, enjoying a privileged position were capable of writing their own, personal life stories. A principal goal of the feminist movement has been, states Mudgal, to recover and honour the specificity of women's experience, history, and cultural significance by making women's voices and stories heard. However, a parallel attempt to suppress the 'undesired' voices has also been continuously made by the activists. Speaking of the status of postcolonial women

belonging to the lower end in the hierarchy, Nayar observes how "[life] writings by such women often present a challenge even to feminists because they resist homogenizing into the larger category of 'Third World women'." (Nayar 152) As such, experiences of women of lower caste, class and 'degraded' professions were made available only as 'stories' in fictions. Though considered the oldest of professions, prostitution is not yet considered a respectable profession. The experiences of a prostitute is never taken account of, rather she faces criticism on moral grounds.

"The institution of prostitution... is shaped by the perception that female sexuality is dangerous and needs careful regulation; that male sexuality is rapacious and needs a "safe" outlet; that sex is dirty and degrading, and that only a degraded woman is an appropriate sexual object" (Mudgal 87) These words demonstrate the collective perspective of society that bars a sex worker's free movement whereas her consumers face no such restrictions. Herein, we notice a gap - unwillingness of the feminist theorists to stand by sex workers. Despite it, 'the prostitute' has been an important theme in twentieth century Indian literature. As remarks Sisir Kumar Das, "It is in some sense continuation and even culmination of the theme so powerfully presented in Indian literature for the first time by Rusva in his classic *Umrao Jan Ada*." (Das 338) Stressing more on the causes leading to women's degradation, the authors expressed their "concern for the exploited and the oppressed." (ibid) Sarat Chandra's portrayal of a noble prostitute had a lingering impact among readers but interestingly enough, Saadat Husain Manto's short stories included in *Cughat* (1948) exhibit an analytical approach. He attempts to explain "the economic factors that compel women to join the flesh trade." (Das 339) By creating images of prostitutes, courtesans, devadasis, various writers have sympathised with their sufferings, pitied their plight but none have cared to protest against the system or worked out a plan for its complete abolition. Perhaps these words of Sisir Kumar Das explain the situation - "Probably the traditional thought that the prostitutes are societal safety valves, alternatives to sexual frustration, worked at the back of their mind." (Das 339) Unless this outlook changes, change in the lives of the sex workers seem difficult. Again, as Sushila Singh puts it, "Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience, with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one-sided or incomplete. Woman has not been defined as a subject either in her own right but merely has an entity that concerns man either in his real life or his fantasy life." (Singh 7)

To note or not :

This being the background, Nalini Jameela, a sex worker from Kerala speaks/writes about her life, her profession and her quest for a dignified identity and gets published. Titled *Oru Laingikatozhilaliyute Atmakatha (Autobiography of a Sex Worker)*, Jameela's autobiography was published in Malayalam in 2005. Termed as a controversial bestseller, it went into six editions in hundred days with the sale of 13,000 copies within a limited time. Criticisms poured in as expected - people were resistant in recognising a sex worker as an

autobiographer. Hailing from a middle class Malayalam family, Nalini begins working in the clay mines at an early age. Later she entered the profession of sex work; it is worth mentioning that in either instance it was her sense of responsibility towards her family. Being a girl child she was deprived of further studies which had an adverse impact on her. The powerful influence of her Valyamma and the passivity of her father strengthen the sensitive girl to be supportive - she starts working for the sake of her mother, a dormant member in the family. With the flow of time, Nalini faces many situations tough to be handled and yet somehow she is able to fight back. Life has been a great tutor to Nalini Jameela, a victim of social imbalance who holds her head high in the midst of a hostile environment. As noted earlier, this autobiography will be the base for the present study - to analyze her case against a conflicting situation and to highlight the aspect of social accountability in this regard. As no human is born a criminal, likewise, no woman is born a prostitute. This being the hypothesis, the following section will comprise an intensive analysis of the text.

From Innocence to Experience:

"... what the book really contains is a simple story of an ordinary Indian woman who happens to have chosen an unconventional occupation as a source of her livelihood."

(Review by Sankalpita, Dec.31, 2013)

Divided into seven chapters, the book is a compilation of memories depicting the phases and range of experience by the author. Nalini's decision to work in clay mine came when her mother lost her job because of her communist husband. She shares the responsibility of her mother who was muted by circumstances. Young Nalini's urge to be of help for her family points toward a very common picture available in the households of ordinary Indians. Ironically enough, a society based on the ideals of Manu that man is the bread earner of the family keeps mum when women and in many cases tender aged girls work hard for livelihood. This exposes the hypocrisy of patriarchal ideologies. The father busied with his political activities had no worry regarding her well being. This hints at the trend of treating girl children as burden. In her book Nalini records how she had to save herself from the lusty adults during those days. She speaks of her admirers as well as of her admiration for others. Again, her episode on the behaviour of Ittamash during her job of an ayah proves how vulnerable a girl child is to sexual exploitations. Her anguished mind however, gets no solace rather she grows up as a 'person'. "Twirl them around, get your job done, get good wages. But keep your position without giving in to them" - tuning to this philosophy, Nalini, a fighter in her true spirits, continues her journey of life. Her wedding(s) too was/were unusual one(s). Throwing her out of house for assisting in her brother's marriage, the otherwise apathetic father exhibits his 'male' power. Just eighteen, with none to help her, this girl had to rely on one of her once rejected admirers, Subrahmanyam, a man with all possible evil means. Unfavoured by circumstances, she was compelled to accept him as her husband. This alliance came to an end just after three and a half years of time when he died leaving behind a son (who died when seventeen) and a daughter with Nalini.

Needy women vis-a-vis 'Needing women':

Life had already been difficult with a dominant mother-in-law and after her widowhood; Nalini begins life afresh -as a sex worker! The demand placed by Subrahmanyam's mother for five rupees a day in order to support her children pushes her to this profession. Fearing she might lose them forever, Nalini drops the idea of sending the kids to an orphanage. Instead, her desperation for supporting the kids leads her to the job of 'going along with' a man. And the fact that her very first client handed her over to police the next morning makes her realise that "men can be both tender and cruel at the same time". The second chapter comprises different episodes of her variegated experiences, sweet and bitter as well. From those days of plying to Thrissur and returning back, she settled in a Company House, which actually was a convenient business space for the clients. Initially supported by Rosa Chechi, now Nalini starts independently. Throughout this period, her 'husband's mother' (in Nalini's words) had received the money earned by Nalini out of flesh trade. Once the sum sent home came back unclaimed, Nalini begins thinking of alternative options, since her sole purpose of joining this trade had been to provide assistance to her kids. The pain of never meeting her children haunts her but at the same time a sense of satisfaction embalms her mind.

In Search of Self-Respect :

The institution of marriage once again proves disastrous for Nalini as she becomes the third (?) wife of Koyakka, a 'loader' in the harbour. Her existence in the house was rendered negligent which injures her strong sense of self-respect. By that time she was in her family way, a helpless situation for her. In her sixth month of pregnancy, Nalini shifts to a separate house. The birth of Zeenat does not help much in improving the situation. However, Koyakka's view of Zeenat as one born of haraam (outside the faith) infuriates Nalini and finally, that marriage (twenty-month old) too meets a tragic end. She leaves him behind and walks away, but this time her child accompanies her. Nalini steps into the trade once more, though reasons for it did not vary. As baby Zeenat was with her, it became tough many a time to visit clients. During those days of hardship, Nalini meets a person who wishes not simply to marry her but also to bring up Zeenat as his own child. Being apprehensive Nalini shows no interest in the beginning but 'this man was different' from others. Exhausted of her ordeal, she approves of his desire and for the next twelve years Nalini did not have 'to struggle to raise her daughter'. As her husband was a Muslim, she takes up the name Jameela so that his family does not cause objection. The respect she had craved for came with this alliance. Shahulkka's relatives were fond of her and this perhaps, is the only period in her life that Nalini cherishes as fond memory. On account of Shahulkka's business, both mother and daughter kept on migrating from place to place. Nalini's practicality is seen in her way of giving lessons to Zeenat on love and life - "It's one thing to love someone. It's yet another to give in just to please him and actually believe his wishes are more important. We lose our

freedom when we submit like that." (57) Shahulkka's affair with another woman and the huge loss incurred in their business together causes a relapse of her struggle. Venturing into the business of selling clothes at Beemapalli, Nalini Jameela strives for a respectable life. Till the middle of 1993, "she lived lavishly - as a proud housewife and trader." Her terrible times start in 1994 with her illness. This time she walks out of the alliance after a long span of twelve years. Literally she is on the streets with her adolescent daughter and a suffering body. Those were the days when they had to take refuge in different mosques struggling for livelihood. Preoccupied by her concern for her daughter's security, Nalini had to be on high alert during those days. Terming their stay at the mosque at Attingara as a terrible phase in her life, she narrates, "So at night we would lay the mat in the middle for Zeenat to lie down, and then we would lie down, making a cordon around her on all four sides. The other three were Nadar Women. Molesters would then have to step on our bodies first." (63) She speaks of the episodes of humiliation when Shahulkka's relatives had been hostile and diplomatic to them. Her quest for a normal life proves futile resulting in her decision on returning to prostitution as a source for survival. By this time she confides to her daughter of her profession, the work that fetches cash for their survival.

Respect for Rights :

"Prostitution has many features that link it with other forms of bodily service. ...but the biggest difference consists in the fact that it is more widely stigmatised."

(Mudgal 72)

Once she interacts with Jwalamukhi, a pro-sex worker organisation, and then becomes a part of it. Her sense of obligation and responsibility makes her an active activist. Her emergence as a public speaker has great significance in her personal growth. Differing in views and opinions, Nalini enables a place for herself in the social milieu.

If you think it's an offence, you're sure to be punished. If you think you have committed a robbery, you'll be first clobbered by the local folk, then by the police, and then the court will punish you. How are we offenders? In what sense? If sex is the offence then there's one more person who must be punished. How come that fellow is never punished? Isn't he an offender too? (85)

This being her conviction, she decides to 'speak up' for herself, for her community. Bringing in a comparison between the status of devadasis of earlier times and that of the sex workers of contemporary times, she questions the prejudiced attitude of the society at large. Acknowledging the support rendered from her women friends Nalini pinpoints how women can be friends and not foes as assumed and reinforced by patriarchy. Gradually Jwalamukhi becomes a symbol of self-confidence for the entire community.

We are free in four respects. We don't have to cook and wait for a husband; we don't have to wash his dirty clothes; we don't have to ask for our husbands' permission to raise our kids as we deem fit; and we don't have to run after our husbands claiming rights to

their property to raise our kids. (107)

On her visit to Kolkata for celebrating Indian Sex Workers' Day on March 3 as organised by Kolkata Sex Workers' Forum, Nalini upholds such unconventional view while commenting on the differences between them and other women. Her visits to Thailand on different occasions enrich her in many ways. By that time she had already made her first documentary and people started recognising her potent. Herein she makes special mention of a young Malayali housewife who used to guide them in sight-seeing in Thailand. Nalini recalls, "how she was ready to interact closely with me, out of the pride she felt that a Malayali woman, and that too a sex worker, had become the director of a documentary." She recalls the constant motivation and support of Jayashree, Maitreyan, Paulson, Sujata, Raj Thomas, Subhash and Jyotikumar - without these progressive people, Nalini Jameela would perhaps never have attained this status. Talking on her daughter's unsuccessful marriage, Nalini considers that second phase as "truly a trial because (her) daughter was now once-married, thought of as likely to run off with anyone". But somehow that incident too had a positive effect, especially on boosting Zeenat's self-confidence. Later she remarries Sudheer, an autorickshaw driver with whom her life is on the track once again. Nalini recounts the petty happenings that expose double-faced people who fear powerful people only. The role of visual media too is condemned by her as gross violation of human rights.

Grounded to Reality :

The next chapter comprises an assemblage of mixed memories - those of her mother, her passion for movies, her views on religion (based on her personal experience) and of her media ties. "I lost faith in God somewhere between the ages of nine and twelve" - this realization of hers continues and intensifies with time. The sufferings of girls and the abandoned people in the mosques make her doubt the existence of God - "If these people don't receive justice in God's own house, what's the point of talking of God?" Believing femininity to be a woman's strength, Nalini discourages the idea of aping men as a mark of progress and equality. Despite her ordeal, this woman carries the baggage of principles and integrity.

Morality redefined :

Speaking on rehabilitation of sex workers, she emphasizes the need of acceptance for the trade. That sex is not just a man's need - this notion remains incomprehensible to most of the feminists barring a few like Jayashree. In her inimitably honest style Nalini claims that feminists aren't very different from ordinary women. Segregating 'sex work' from 'sexual exploitation' she demands 'decriminalisation', not 'rehabilitation'.

Conclusion:

Saga of Strife for Survival :

Can her life be read against her positioning in a conflicting situation? - in fact, this query constitutes my desire to study the memoir of Nalini Jameela. The detailed analysis made here strongly affirms my conviction. The conflicts present in domestic space and also

in the public domain are major factors in the making of Nalini a sex worker. An unhappy childhood attributed by an irresponsible father marks the first phase of conflicting situation in her life. The typical notion of man being a bread winner for his family goes wrong in her case; an otherwise able person depending on the earnings of his wife and daughter puzzles young Nalini. She behaves accordingly, taking her first lesson on sustenance. Her lone battle for preserving chastity exposes another serious vulnerable issue relevant in our society - the issue of child abuse or sexual harassment. Despite having a father and a brother, she has to safeguard herself among perverts. Subsequently, she matures prematurely. The patriarchal society has contributed in every ways to demolish Nalini Jameela's self-respect, her integrity. Her unsuccessful marriages depict the inequalities prevalent in this social institution. Unlike thousands of submissive women, Nalini shows courage by walking out of the alliances, at least twice. The first marriage ended early on account of her husband's death, but by that time she has seen much of life. Her decision to enter the sex trade for survival (instead of killing herself and her kids) exhibits her love for life; never been an escapist, Nalini faces the challenges that come to her. Keeping in mind the economic factors responsible for this, we may surmise that if this occupation be not chosen by her, a widow of her age would have fallen prey to someone's lust. Instead, Nalini sets her own terms - she does not represent the docile female stereotype, accessible almost everywhere. Constantly motivated by a strong sense of pride, this common woman carves a niche through self-acceptance. Though my objective here is not to propagate sex work, these words of Mudgal echo my views, "So long as prostitution is stigmatized, people are injured by that stigmatization, and it is a real injury to a person not to have dignity and self-respect in her own society." (76) Her clear cut views on remuneration for sex work or on the differences existing among sex workers living in different socio-economic conditions throw light on the practicality of the issue. The preconceived notions on sex work and sex workers pose hurdle in recognising the occupation as any other remunerative service. Similarly, the hierarchical pattern within this trade proves unfavourable for the lowest class of sex workers. Critics consider her focus on irrelevance of moral distinctions made between sex work, housework and paid work in lives of marginalised women as one of the powerful aspects of her story. To this, she answers, during an interview with J. Devika (one who translated Nalini's book into English) that as "the struggle to survive is largely the woman's burden" and if it is also "to support others," then [she] won't be concerned with whether the work [she gets] is dignified or not." Thus, women who possess nothing but a body offer that to their clients in return of some hard cash. Herein arises conflict, conflict between

good/bad

ethical/unethical

moral/immoral

dignified/undignified

acceptance/unacceptance

private/public

Imbibing the feminine traits endowed by patriarchy, numerous women like Nalini Jameela stretch themselves to this extent: in a relentless process of being a caring daughter, mother, sister or even wife (?) they enter this trade (as the last resort). Can this endeavour be negated as immoral, bad, unethical or undignified? Do they deserve outright rejection just because of being sex workers? Situations reversed, how would society project a woman who allows her family to starve in poverty? Unaware of these philosophical or ethical dimensions, marginalised women join sex trade, their sole concern being 'survival'. These deep seated inequalities in our social environment need to be narrowed so that every human being is granted his/her share of dignity. Nalini Jameela's narrative hits at a crucial issue - she challenges the "dominant feminine ideal" in Kerala (appearing as an "oppositional voice" in their public.) Her story, rightly infers J. Devika, "rejects dominant Womanhood not only by relating the hitherto-untold story of the marginalized labouring woman-subject, but also by not seeking to be defined within the home-centred category of Women." (xv) Representing the marginalised sex workers, Jameela voices this muted and abhorred community which had always been criticised on moral grounds. As an insider, Nalini discloses how thin the line lying between domestic and public is in reality. Documenting her quest for dignified identity, Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* reveals certain shady factors that directly and indirectly contribute towards aggravating the disparities and also decodes many myths about 'them'.

"I am a sex worker among the intellectuals." (169)

As survivor, not victim, Nalini proves that 'dignity of labour' is not a myth for sex workers as well. On the whole, this autobiography by a subaltern woman who is into an unusual profession may be considered an eye-opener for comprehending the lives of sex workers and also for re-thinking on social parity and justice.

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Children's Literature in Assamese A Brief Account of its Growth

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If you wish to write for a child, what you need above all is to know the child's mind.

Somerset Maugham

Introduction:

Since literature reflects life, in a way it can be said that life of children is reflected in children's literature. This genre of literature may be considered a requisite for crafting the growing minds. Over the course of time, post several debates on the image of 'child', childhood is acknowledged as a transition phase before attainment of adulthood. That however does neither impede nor wipe out the already existing volume of literature exclusively created for children. Long ago, before the existence of any written form, children's literature survived in oral form. Generations in the past had thus been nourished with folk songs, folk tales, lullabies and rhymes told to them by elders. This bulk of oral literature forms a rich heritage as a whole. This is a common phenomenon for all languages around the world. But records show how the rate of growth varies in respect of different languages. Children's literature in English is amazingly rich in comparison to any other language. The reason is obvious. It has become a global language reaching out to all corners of the world. In the context of Indian languages, notable contribution has been made by Bengali and Malayalam languages toward children's literature. Such development often depends on the factors as linguistic, social and political influence of a particular region and its language. Assamese language too owns a worthy storehouse of this genre.

Objectives of the study:

In this paper, I have made an attempt to present a concise outline of the journey of Assamese children's literature.

- The main objective of the study is to trace the lineage of children's literature in Assamese.
- Besides, the present study will highlight the different trends followed during different phases.

Methodology:

For the present study, descriptive-analytical methodology is applied. Based on the historical data on Assamese children's literature, my study will focus on analysing it for deducing findings.

Sources of the Data:

The present study is based on various books, journals, articles etc. with information about history of Assamese literature in general and children's literature in particular.

Discussion:

Children's literature is any literature which is appropriate for children. Operationally, children's literature comprises those books written and published for young people who are not yet interested in adult literature or who may not possess the reading skills necessary for its perusal. In addition to book form, children's literature also includes materials published in magazine form and intended for pre-adult audiences. The age range embraced by children's literature is from pre-school age, when children can first comprehend stories being read or told to them and can enjoy the picture story books which are now so plentiful, through the stage of early adolescence, which roughly coincides with the chronological ages of 12 through 14.

(Encyclopaedia of Education 1971, Vol. 6)

As the above statement provides a basic concept of children's literature, we refrain from further discussion on it. Our primary objective here will be to sketch out a brief history of children's literature in Assamese. Every region and language has its own history of children's literature. Despite distinctive features, children's literature in general has its origin in oral tradition. Assamese language is no exception. Every culture is enriched with its own myths, fables and tales. The lullabies, rhymes, folklores and myths together constitute the material which aided in shaping the curious young minds of our ancestors. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are still considered as rich resources for developing numerous stories for Indian children in general. The *Hitopadesha* and the *Jataka* Tales also have similar influence. The *Panchatantra*, written in AD 200, along with the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* still remains unparalleled in the history of Indian children's

literature. Translated into almost all Indian languages, these have immensely influenced the moral character of generations.

Keeping this in mind, we have to study the journey of Assamese children's literature. We have to classify each phase with its unique characteristics in order to comprehend its history from the formative phase to the present stage. This will enable us in realizing the trends followed and also to place it in the Indian context to pinpoint the similarities and dissimilarities.

Upendra Borkotoky's classification of the history of Assamese children's literature is somewhat broad. (Borkotoky, p 11-83) He divided it into three phases,

- 1) Beginning with the phase of oral literature to Bezbaroa,
- 2) From Bezbaroa to A.D.1940 and
- 3) From A.D. 1940 to the present time.

However, for the present study I have used a modified classification which is as follows:

1. Beginning
2. Medieval Period
 - i) Pre-*Vaishnava* Era (AD 1300-AD 1500)
 - ii) *Vaishnava* Era (Latter part of AD 1500 – Last Part of AD 1600)
3. Modern Period
 - (i) *Orunodai* Era (1846 – 1889)
 - (ii) Jonaki Era (1889 – 1939)
 - (iii) Post Jonaki Era till the present

Beginning:

Without any specific year of commencement, this phase comprises the oral literature that perpetuated through generations. Long ago, before the existence of any written form, children's literature survived in oral transmission. Generations in the past had thus been nourished with folk songs, folk tales, lullabies and rhymes told to them by elders. This bulk of oral literature forms a rich heritage as a whole. In Assamese we have popular lullabies like

- *Aamare moina xubo e*
- *Xiyalie nahibi rati*

or rhymes as

- *O phul o phul nuphulo kiyo*
- *Irikoti Mirikoti Baahor Xola*

which showcase the imaginative nature of children. Created by anonymous people, these helped in nurturing the child's mind and in preparing it for the adult world. Thus, this phase of oral literature can be taken as the foundation for Assamese children's literature.

Medieval Period:

i) Pre-Vaishnava Era (AD 1300-AD 1500):

Assamese literature belonging to the early and the middle age was mainly built upon the translation works and adaptations from the bulk of Sanskrit literature. Interestingly, children's literature in Assamese also has its roots that date back to the Pre-Vaishnava era (A.D. 1300 – A.D. 1490) with translations of scriptures and related literature. Madhava Kandali translated five cantos of the *Mahabharata*. Madhava Kandali's translation of Valmiki's Ramayana in "a colloquial language depicting Rama legend in Assamese homely atmosphere" highlights the translator's target audience oriented approach. (Jamuna, 3) These adaptations and translations have notable contribution to the growth of children's literature in Assamese. Composed in the 14th century, Hem Saraswati's *Prahlad Charit* (translated from *Vamana Purana*) is considered as the first known poem comprising 100 couplets illustrating child psychology. (Neog, 68) During this period we have works like *Vabrubahanar Yuddha*, *Lavakushar Yuddha* and *Tamradhwajar Yuddha* authored by Harihar Vipra.

ii) Vaishnava Era (Last part of AD 1500 – Last Part of AD 1600):

During the 15th century Assam witnessed a fresh wave of Vaishnavism. Sankardeva, the founder of Neo-Vaishnavism and his disciple Madhabdeva were the two guiding forces of this movement. With his translation of several cantos of the *Bhagavata Purana*, Sankardeva (1449- 1568) joined the brigade of translators in Assamese. But the originality of Sankardeva lies in his unique creation of *Ankiya Nats* (one act plays), mainly based on the *Puranas*, the *Bhagavata*, Ramayana and similar mythological texts. Although written for religious purpose, these plays had been tremendously popular among children. Assamese Children's literature of the medieval period was thus inspired by religious

motivation blended with moral education. As such *Sisulila*, *Bali-Chalana*, *Shyamantaka-Harana* from Sankardeva's *Kirtana Ghosa* are fine examples of children's literature. Child Krishna's mischievous image finds brilliant expression in the hands of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva. For example, *jhumuras* (a form of dramatic art) like *Chordhara and Pimpora Gusowa*, authored by Madhabdeva has universal appeal. His image of Child Krishna represents eternal and universal childhood. (Adhikari, 39) Though based on religious texts like *Puranas*, in portrayal of Krishna's character in *Chordhora*, *Pimpora Gusowa*, *Bhojana Vihara*, *Bhumi Letowa* etc Madhabdeva excels to a great extent that these may be taken as equivalent to original composition.

During this period, Rama Saraswati translated the Mahabharata into Assamese. However, his fame rests more on the fact that he had introduced a new kind of poetry into Assamese, known as *Badha Kavyas* (Adventurous/Heroic Tales of Killing). These *kavyas* narrate the various incidents wherein the heroes (Arjuna, Bhima etc.) risk their lives and kill demons. Echoing the concept of victory of virtue over evil, these *kavyas* can be seen at par with the Greek legends/ballads. "It seems that Rama Saraswati has written his work keeping in mind the taste of children" –this observation by Indira Goswami referring to his *Bhima Charit*, clearly shows that even in earlier days Assamese writers honoured the taste of children.

Another contemporary work is Sridhar Kandali's poem *Kankhowa*. It is an original work of considerable length. In fact, Indira Goswami terms it as "an important secular creative work for children". This work differs from the rest because the theme is an original one, though characters are common. This poem is about Yashoda's efforts to lull little Krishna to sleep. She terrifies Krishna by referring to an imaginative demon named *Kankhowa* who eats ears of naughty kids. It may be noted that a popular lullaby in Assamese contains an almost similar theme. It goes thus, "*Siyali e nahibi raati/ tore kanekati logaame bat*" which by indirectly warning the fox warns the child to immediately fall asleep.

Thus the medieval period in Assamese literature had witnessed the beginning of children's literature. It was a mixed bag of writings, both translations and original works. Popularity of mythical adaptations is a notable feature. Though not large in numbers, these writings are of a high excellence. Abundance of child images, particularly of Krishna, Bhima and Hanuman in the literature of this period is another remarkable feature. Till 16th and 17th centuries, classical sources happened to be the base for Assamese children's literature.

Modern Period

(i) *Orunodai* Era (1846 – 1889):

The year 1826 marks a new beginning in the history of Assam. The Treaty of Yandaboo ushered in radical changes in the history of Assam as a whole. Consequently, the arrival of the American Baptist Missionaries in 1836 heralded the modern period of Assamese literature too. This also marked the influx of western culture into literature. It all began with the publication of *Orunodai*(1846), the first literary magazine in Assamese. This magazine provided platform for a distinct variety of children's literature in Assamese. Stories from the Bible were especially published for the children. After all, the basic goal of the missionaries was propagation of Christianity. Many stories from different countries were translated to cater to the needs of Assamese children. During this period, emphasis was put on translation resulting in publication of several translated story books for this readership. *America Aviskar* (Discovery of America), *Bibelor Xadhu* (Stories from Bible), *Jatrikor Jatra* (Pilgrim's Progress), *Africar Konwar* (Prince of Africa) are some of them. *Orunodoi* had another popular feature for children, titled Journal of Events wherein interesting facts were documented for updating knowledge as well as for enjoyment.

Missionaries like Rev. Nathan Brown, Rev. Dr. Miles Bronson, Mrs. S.R. Ward, Mr. O.T. Cutter, Mrs. Harriet Cutter, Rev. Garni, Mrs. Garni and Mrs. Eliza Brown have made outstanding contribution in this regard. Assamese children's literature flourished under the patronage of these dedicated missionaries.

Another noble endeavour of the missionaries was publication of text books for children. *Ujupath* (1884) by Baladev Mahanta, *Asamiya Lorar Vyakaran* (1886) by Hem Ch. Barua are to name a few of them. Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan's *Asomiya Lorar Mitrais* another notable creation of this time.

It is worth mentioning here that Assamese magazines have been vital in popularising children's literature since 1888. This was the year when under the editorship of Karunabhiram Baruah, '*Lora Bondhu*', the first children's magazine in Assamese was published. Exactly 100 years back the first English Children's magazine 'Children Magazine' (1789) was published in America. Some more prominent Assamese magazines like *Jonaki* (1889), *Bijuli* (1890), *Banhi* (1910), *Usa* (1907), *Awahon* (1929) also contributed toward the growth of children's literature.

ii) Jonaki Era (1889 – 1939):

In the field of children's literature Lakshminath Bezbaroa(1864-1938), a stalwart in the annals of Assamese literature, made a unique contribution in the form of his collection of stories entitled *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (1912). Collected from different media and rewritten in Bezbaroa's own style, this collection of 31 tales carves a niche in Assamese literary history. *Kokadeuta aru Natilora* (1912) and *Junuka* are the two collections of short stories written by him. His stories are mostly steeped with moral values. The unique feature of Bezbaroa's writing is his typical use of colloquial Assamese language. His emphasis on promoting language through literature can be seen as a dominant agenda.

Several other collections of short stories were published during this period. By collecting stories from various sources and reproducing them in a new way, writers like Sarat Chandra Goswami (*Asamiya Sadhu Katha*), Kumudeshwar Borthakur (*Sadhur Bhoral*), Dr. Banikanta Kakati (*Pakhila*) etc. had contributed greatly toward documenting a segment of Assamese oral literature. All these collections had a common motive of amusement for their readers. However, some tried to impart moral education through their stories.

Another outstanding literary artist was Atul Chandra Hazarika whose fame rests largely on his works including poems, drama, novel, story etc. written for children. *Nila Chorai* (1948), *Rani Himani* (1962) and *Jalakunwari* (1968) are children novels authored by him. Interestingly, Padmanath Gohain Baruah, a contemporary of Bezbaroa laid stress on preparation of textbooks for children. He believed that a strong foundation is utmost necessary for sustainability of Assamese literature.

Vishnupriya Devi (*Sadhukatha*) and Troilokeswari Baruani (*Sondhiyar Sadhu*) were eminent women writers of that period of time.

This period appeared to be a fertile ground for translation work. Work from almost every literary genre was selected either for translation or for adaptation. As a result, foreign and regional literature found access into Assamese surmounting the linguistic barrier. The objective was to introduce world literature to the Assamese children and thus to widen their perspective. Hem Baruah's *Cupid and Psyche*, Pravina Saikia's *Ojan Dexot Alice*, Dr. Mahendra Bora's *Gulliver's Travels*, Kirti Nath Hazarika's *Ehejar Enixar Xadhu*, Nirupama Borgohain's *Okonmani Konwar* etc. are some of the Assamese titles

translated for children. Gyanadabhiram Baruah is noted for his *Dodair Poja*(1930)a translation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Several children's magazines were published during this period but for some unknown reason, these magazines failed to survive for long.

(iii) Post Jonaki Era till the present:

Biographies have remained another area of interest explored since 1940s. Eventually a large number of biographies were written and published for child readers. Titles as Dr. Bhabananda Dutta's *Rabindra Pratibha*, Binanda Barua's *Lorar Bezbaroa*, Satyavati Goswami's *Eleneor Roosevelt*, Gajendra Chahariya's *Swaheed Kanaklata* illustrate the wide range selected by the biographers.

As for children's drama, we notice a slower pace of growth during this phase. Nevertheless, the plays written for adults were enjoyed by young adults (age group 12-14). It is interesting to know that plays based on historical characters and events were received with much enthusiasm. Thus, plays like *Maniram Dewan* (1948) by Pravin Phukan or *Kushal Konwar* (1949) by Surendra Nath Saikia or *Tikendrajit* (1959) by Atul Chandra Hazarika succeed in gaining popularity among young and old alike.

Jyotiprasad Agarwala is another iconic figure in Assamese literature. His outstanding contribution toward art and literature is in the making of the first Assamese film *Joymoti* in 1935. Jyotiprasad Agarwala's keen interest on study of child psychology is well expressed in poems like *Akanir Xopun*, *Kumpur Xopun*, *Okonmanir Prarthana*. Similarly, his excellence as playwright is displayed in *Nimati Koina* and *Sonpakhili* written exclusively for children. Lyrical form of drama for children was also popularised by him. Kirtinath Bordoloi, Saujanya mayee Devi etc. were among followers of this tradition.

There was no looking back since then onwards. Unlike the earlier phases, children's literature witnessed manifold growth; producing poetry, fiction, drama, science fiction, adventure stories, biographies, travelogues, novels etc.

Children's poetry in Assamese has developed a lot since the later part of 20th century and the first part of 21st century. The beauty of poems written by Dr. Nirmalprova Bordoloi and published in collections titled *Omola Geet*, *Xuwodi Maat*, *Notun Omola Geet* etc. have never faded away. Likewise, we have Lila Gogoi's *Khora Xiyalor Biya*, Eli Ahmed's *Dokmokalir Geet* and many more.

Nabakanta Baruah, Nirmalprova Bordoloi, Premadhar Dutta, Bhabendranath Saikia, Lakhyahira Das, Gagan Chandra Adhikari, Eli Ahmed are some milestones on this path. Each of them has rendered huge support in strengthening Assamese children's literature. The list continues but it is difficult to offer a detailed discussion here.

Translation still continues to be popular among readers. Toshaprova Kalita's Assamese translation of Tetsuko Kuryonagi's *Tottochandeserves* special mention as it still continues to win hearts of young people. Reputed publishing houses like National Book Trust has been publishing children's books translated into Assamese, a remarkable initiative under the banner of Nehru Bal Pustakalaya.

The gradual emergence of children's novel, scientific fictions and detective stories indicate a healthy growth rate for this genre. Though slow in comparison to literature in some other Indian language, Assamese children's literature is maintaining a steady pace of development.

Unlike the magazines of former times, children's magazines like *Sofura* (1983) and *Mouchaq*(1984) have completed 30 years of their existence. This certainly is a remarkable and rare achievement for the publishers as well as the readers.

Findings of the study:

- From the above study, we infer that Assamese children's literature has come a long way since its beginning. Like literature in other languages, here too prior to written language, the literature was preserved in oral tradition. Efforts made by later writers as Lakshminath Bezbaroa to document and restore some parts of the oral literature in written texts are definitely commendable. That is how we are connected to the beginning of our literary history.
- Poetry dominates the initial part of written tradition. Then comes drama succeeded by prose literature. This however, is a common feature in the history of any literature.
- The predominance of male writers in the early years is representative of a universal trend. The present scenario is different and we see women writers more in number.
- The significance of children's magazines is vital in the growth of Assamese children's literature. Since the first publication of '*Lora Bondhu*' (edited by

Karunabhiram Baruah) the first Assamese children's magazine in the year 1888 till today, many such magazines appeared and disappeared in between. Nevertheless, children's magazines in Assamese never lost readers as a whole.

- As compared to fictions, children's drama is developing at a slower pace. We have a good number of playwrights for children who have made remarkable contribution. However, dramas are primarily meant for enactment. Therefore, survival of drama is greatly dependent on its performance on stage.
- Finally, we have to acknowledge the contribution of translation to Assamese children's literature. Beginning in the pre-Vaishnava age with translation from Sanskrit, there has been continuity in this process. Thus we are enriched with translation not only from Indian regional languages, but also from other foreign languages. As a whole, children's literature translation plays a vital role in the growth of children's literature in Assamese.

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ISSN: 2319-8893

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ড° পংকজ শইকীয়া • অসম আন্দোলন আৰু অসমৰ সাংস্কৃতিক জাগৰণ • ৩০
প্ৰবন্ধ ভাস্কৰজ্যোতি নাথ • বমন্যাসবাদ আৰু অসমীয়া কবিতা • ৩৬
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আব্দুল মালিক • ভ্ৰমণ-কাহিনীকাৰ চৈয়দ আব্দুল মালিক • ৫১

কবিতা বদ্র সিংহ মটক, সৌভ শইকীয়া • ৫৪
নীলকান্ত শইকীয়া, বাজীৰ চন্দ্ৰ দেব গোস্বামী • ৫৫
কৰবী ডেকা হাজৰিকা, অমিতাভ ফুকন, ডাঃ বাজীৰ ভট্টাচাৰ্য • ৫৬
বিজয় ববিদাস, অঞ্জিৎ গগৈ, ড° নীলিমা গোস্বামী শৰ্মা • ৯১
দেবপ্ৰসাদ তালুকদাৰ, ধীমান বৰ্মন • ৯২

গল্প নিৰ্মালি সন্দিকৈৰ চাৰিটা গল্প • যশোদা, প্ৰাইড এণ্ড প্ৰেজুডিচ, জেওবা, তৃতীয় • ৮২

অনুবাদ
গল্প মূল : গুলজাৰ, অনুবাদ : সুপৰ্ণা লাহিড়ী বৰুৱা • বাভিৰ পাবত • ৮৫
মূল : ইছমাইল গৌহৰ, অনুবাদ : ময়ূৰী শৰ্মা বৰুৱা • দেউতা • ৮৭
মূল : মাচাদো ডি আছিছ, অনুবাদ : বশ্বিৰেখা গগৈ • মিডনাইট মাছ • ১১২

নিয়মীয়া লেখা

দেৱব্ৰত দাসৰ

হিমাব পখিলাবোৰ • ৮৯

বাৰ্তালাপ



ভাষা-গৱেষক ড° নগেন ঠাকুৰৰ সৈতে
অতনু ভট্টাচাৰ্য আৰু ড° প্ৰাপ্তি ঠাকুৰৰ
কথোপকথন ৭২

অনুবাদ
কবিতা য়েছে দবজে ঠংচি • ১১০
ইন্দ্ৰনীল গায়ন • ১১১

বাৰ্তা
বাস্তৱ

নিশা ভূঞা • ৬৬

দেউতা

মূল (উৰ্দু) : ইছমাইল গৌহৰ
 অনুবাদ : ময়ূৰী শৰ্মা বৰুৱা

দেউতাৰ ভৰি দুখন জপটিয়াই ধৰি নাযাবচোন বুলি মই কাবো কৰিছিলোঁ। পিছে তেওঁ মোক গোব মাৰি ওফৰাই দিলে। সৰু ভাইটোৱেও ভৰিত পৰি বিনালে, 'বাবা, নালাগে যাব।' তাকো মেকুৰী পোৱালি দলিওৱাদি আঁতৰাই পঠিয়ালে। উধাতু খাই আহি মায়ে তেওঁৰ স্বলখন দেউতাৰ সন্মুখত মেলি ধৰি ফেঁকুৰি উঠিল, 'এবাব এই ল'ৰা-ছোৱালীহালৰ কথা ভাবক। আপুনি যাব নেলাগে ওঁ!' দেউতাই মাক মুখৰ আগৰ পৰা গতিয়াই বগৰাই দিলে। তেওঁ এজন পুস্তো সম্প্ৰদায়ৰ মানুহ। তেওঁৰ সন্তাত জাতিগত অহংকাৰ টগৰগাই থাকে। খঙত বলিয়া হৈ তেওঁ কাবো কথাই নুশুনিলে। মূৰত পাণ্ডৰি পিন্ধি বন্দুকটো হাতত লৈ তেওঁ ধুমুহাৰ বেগেৰে ওলাই গুচি গ'ল। দেউতাৰ পিছে পিছে আমিও ঢপলিয়াই গৈছিলোঁ। কিন্তু আমি পদূলিমুখ পাওঁগৈ মানে তেওঁ আলিমুৰ পাৰ হৈ নিজৰ লক্ষ্য অভিমুখে বাওনা হৈছিল।

তেতিয়া মোৰ বয়স আছিল বাৰ আৰু আখতাৰ, মানে মোৰ ভাইটো আছিল আঠবছৰীয়া। গোটেই দিনটো কান্দি কান্দি গধূলিপৰলৈ সি টোপনিত চলি পৰিছিল। অথচ মই এতিয়ালৈকে কান্দিয়েই আছোঁ। জীয়াই থাকোঁ মানে মোৰ চকুলো নুশকায়।

দেউতাৰ খং উঠিছিল গুল মীৰৰ ওপৰত। সেইদিনা মছজিদতে তেওঁ দেউতাক বেয়াকৈ কিবা কৈছিল। কিবা এটা মীমাংসা নোহোৱালৈকে গছজোপা নাকাটিবলৈ মোৰ চাচায়ো দেউতাক বুজাইছিল। সেই মুহূৰ্তত কোনো কথাই শুনিবলৈ ৰাজী নাছিল দেউতা। তেওঁৰ মতে, 'সেইখিনি মোৰ মাটি আৰু ই বেটাই হুকুম জাৰি কৰিব খুজিছে।'

আৰু তাৰ পাছত যেতিয়া গুল মীৰে দেউতাক বঙা চকু দেখুৱাই প্ৰত্যাহ্বান জনালে তেতিয়া বন্দুকৰ দমত তেওঁক এশিকনি দিবলৈ বুলি দেউতা ওলাই গ'ল। ইমান চেপ্টা কৰিও আমি তেওঁক বখাব নোৱাৰিলোঁ।



গুল মীৰৰ ল'ৰা দুটাই তেতিয়া আগচোতালত তুঁহুঙি আৰু বোকামাটিৰ লেও বনাই আছিল। দেউতাই ঠাইতে সিহঁত দুটাক বতম কৰি পেলালে। আখতাৰ তেতিয়া টোপনিত। বিকট চিঞৰ এটা মাৰি সি ধহমহকৈ সাৰ পাই গ'ল। সেয়া যেন কিবা ভয়ংকৰ অমংগলৰ আগজাননীহে আছিল। মায়ে দৌৰি গৈ তাক বুকুত সুমুৱাই নিচুকাবলৈ ল'লে। পিঠিত লাহে লাহে খপৰিয়াই দিয়াত সি আকৌ শুই গ'ল। কিন্তু চকুৰ টিপ নমৰাকৈ আমি দুজনী গোটেই নিশাটো তেনেকৈয়ে থাকিলোঁ। বাতিৰ ঘোপমাৰা আন্ধাৰত বাস্তাৱত কুকুৰে ডুকিলেই আমাৰ উশাহ বন্ধ হোৱাৰ উপক্ৰম হৈছিল। ওৰে বাতি কুকুৰজাকে ডুকি আছিল আৰু অজান আশংকাত আমাৰ বুকু কঁপি আছিল। দুটাকৈ ডেকা ল'ৰাক মাৰি থৈ দেউতা তেতিয়ালৈ নিৰুদ্দেশ হৈছিল।

আমাৰ চকুৰ আগতে সময় সলনি হৈছিল। লগতে মানুহবোৰো। সমবেদনা জনোৱাৰ উদ্দেশ্যেৰে গুল মীৰৰ ঘৰলৈ যোৱা মানুহবিলাকে কৈছিল, 'ইচ ইচ, আপোনাৰ প্ৰতি এয়া চূড়ান্ত অন্যায়।'

সেই একেখিনি মানুহে আমাৰ ঘৰত আহি কৈছিল, 'ছে, বৰ বেয়া কথা হ'ল।'

বন্ধুৰ একেটাই আছিল। কেৱল শব্দবোৰ ইফাল-সিফাল কৰা হৈছিল। অবশ্যে আমি বুজাত তাৰ অৰ্থৰ বিশেষ কোনো হেৰফেৰ নাছিল। দেউতানো ক'ত আছিল সেয়া না মায়ে কিবা গম পাইছিল, না মই কিবা জানিছিলোঁ। য'তেই নাথাকক কিয়, তেওঁৰ উগ্ৰ খংটো যে তেতিয়ালৈ জামবিছিল সেই কথাটোত কিন্তু মই নিশ্চিত আছিলোঁ। ইতিমধ্যে পস্তাইছেই চাগে। বঙৰ ভমকত আগ-পিছ নুগুণি বেয়া কাম এটা কৰাৰ অনুশোচনাই দেউতাক বান্ধকৈয়ে দহিব পাৰে। তেওঁৰ পৰ্বতকায় অহংকাৰ এতিয়ালৈ চোঁচা পৰিল চাগে। হয়তোবা তেওঁৰ অহংকাৰ আৰু পুস্তো ভেমে এতিয়ালৈ কিবা ইতিবাচক ৰূপ লৈছে।

আমাৰ গাঁওখনক সকলোৱে বন্ধুৰ গাঁও বুলিয়েই জানে। বন্ধুৰ মেলত যিকোনো জটিল আৰু বিয়াগোম সমস্যাৰ সমাধানসূত্ৰ ওলাইছিল। আকৌ এবাৰ গাঁৱৰ মানুহবিলাক একগোট হ'ল। মূল বৰমেলখনৰ আখৰা হিচাপে সৰু সৰু গোটবিলাক লৈ সৰুকৈ ৰাইজমেল পতা হ'ল। ফুচফুটীয়া প্ৰচাৰ আৰু ডালেমান সৰু সৰু ৰাইজমেলৰ অন্তত এমাহৰ মূৰত দেউতাক বিচাৰি পোৱা গ'ল। তাৰ পাছত আৰম্ভ হ'ল মিটমাটৰ প্ৰক্ৰিয়া।

সেই ঘটনাটো ঘটাব দিন ধৰি মোৰ প্ৰতি মোৰ আচৰণ সলনি হৈ গৈছিল। মনৰ শংকাৰ সমান্তৰালকৈ মৌলৈ মাৰ মৰম বাঢ়িছিল। তেওঁ মোক বেছিকৈ গুৰুত্ব দিবলৈ লৈছিল। আনকি অনবৰতে মোৰ যতন লোৱাতে তেওঁ ব্যস্ত হৈ পৰিছিল। মায়ে কিবা অদ্ভুত কথাবিলাক ক'বলৈ আৰম্ভ কৰিছিল— কিবা ভাগ্যৰ কথা, পৰিস্থিতিৰ লগত মোকাবিলা কৰাৰ কথা ইত্যাদি। কেতিয়াবা কোনো লাগ-বান্ধ নোহোৱাকৈ অস্পষ্ট কথাবে মায়ে যেন মোক কিবা বুজাবলৈ যত্ন কৰিছিল। আনকি কেতিয়াবা এনেকৈ থৰ লাগি মৌলৈ চাই থাকে এই যেন মই অতল সমুদ্ৰত ডুব গৈছোঁ আৰু অসহায় হৈ পাবৰ পৰা মায়ে সেই দৃশ্য চাই আছে।

সেইদিনা আমাৰ ঘৰ ভৰ্তি। এগাল মিত্ৰ-কুটুম্বমেৰে ভৰ্তি। কোনেও মোৰ চকুলৈ চোৱা নাছিল। তেওঁলোক যে পৰম অসহায় সেই কথা তেওঁলোকৰ প্ৰত্যেকৰে মুখত বৰ বৰ হৰফেৰে লিখি থোৱা আছিল। কিজানি আগন্তুক মেলখনৰ আশংকাত তেনে হৈছিল। মই আকৌ ভাবি আছিলোঁ সেইদিনাখনৰ মেলতে ৰায় দিয়া হ'ব আৰু দুয়োঘৰৰ মাজত মিটমাট হ'ব। সেইটোতো ফুৰ্তিৰহে কথা। তেতিয়াহ'লে চবৰে মুখবোৰ ইমান শুকান কিয়?

পাছতহে গম পালোঁ মই কিমান মূৰ্ব আছিলোঁ। ৰাইজমেলত ৰায়দানৰ লগে লগে সকলোৰে শংকাৰ কাৰণটো ওলাই পৰিল।

আৰু দেউতা, যাৰ বলিয়া জঁকটো তেতিয়ালৈ শাম কাটিছিল, যাৰ পৰ্বতপ্ৰমাণ ভেম তেতিয়ালৈ সজুট হৈছিল, তেওঁ বিনাপ্ৰতিবাদে সুৰসুৰকৈ ৰাইজমেলৰ সিদ্ধান্তটো মানি লৈছিল।

ৰায়টো আছিল— এক লাখ টকা আৰু এজনী জীয়েক।

কোনোবাই ক'লে, পিছে গুল মীৰৰ দুয়োটা পুতেককে দেখোন মাৰি পেলালে, এতিয়া এই ছোৱালীজনী...'

প্ৰথমজনৰ কথা শেষ হ'বলৈকে নাপালে, দ্বিতীয় এজনে কৈ উঠিল, 'এইটো ৰাইজমেলৰ সিদ্ধান্ত। এক লাখ টকাৰ লগতে ছোৱালীজনী তেওঁক দিবই লাগিব। তাইক লৈ কি কৰে, নকৰে সেইটো তেওঁৰ কথা।'

তৃতীয় কণ্ঠই মাত লগালে, 'গুল মীৰ, তেওঁৰো দেখোন ঘৈণীয়েকজনী মৰিল...'

চিঞৰ এটা মোৰ ডিঙিত লাগি ধৰিল, কিন্তু হিয়াভগা কান্দোনটোৰ সৈতে মায়ে মোক নিজৰ বুকুলৈ টানি লৈ গ'ল।

(এম. আছদুদ্দিনৰ দ্বাৰা উৰ্দুৰ পৰা ইংৰাজীলৈ অনূদিত গল্পটি সাহিত্য অকাডেমিয়ে প্ৰকাশ কৰা 'Short Stories from Pakistan' শীৰ্ষক সংকলনৰ পৰা লোৱা হৈছে।)

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গুল মীৰৰ ল'ৰা দুটাই
তেতিয়া আগচোতালত
তুঁহুঙি আৰু
বোকামাটিৰ লেও বনাই
আছিল। দেউতাই
ঠাইতে সিহঁত দুটাক
বতম কৰি পেলালে।
আখতাৰ তেতিয়া
টোপনিত। বিকট চিঞৰ
এটা মাৰি সি ধহমহকৈ
সাৰ পাই গ'ল। সেয়া
যেন কিবা ভয়ংকৰ
অমংগলৰ আগজাননীহে
আছিল। মায়ে দৌৰি
গৈ তাক বুকুত সুমুৱাই
নিচুকাবলৈ ল'লে।