

## Tracing The 'Space' Of Women In Assamese Society Through The Evaluation Of Biyanam

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### Abstract

The presentation of women is one of the widely discussed topic in literary works and research activities. As the most important part of a society womenfolk played the most important role in not only framing the family but also the society too. But despite of having such essential contribution towards the society the woman folk are often marginalized, their voices remain unheard in a patriarchal society. Their movements are confined within the household activities. They considered their status and identity as their fortunes and started living with it. Through various songs and rituals they started presenting their experiences, their voices against various structures through which they were being marginalized. One such area is the folksongs, through which they sketch the 'inner world' of every household. But they remain as mere songs until a different approach is introduced by the feminist study of the folksongs. One of such folksongs is the biyanaams of Assamese society, through which the women present the importance of rituals of marriage and along with that they prepare the bride for the life in her in-laws' place. Through this paper an approach has been made to trace the space of women in a patriarchal society with the study of biyanaams. The main objectives of the paper are to figure out the life of female and the ways through which a woman is marginalized. In the process of preparing the paper the participatory, analytical approach has been taken to the best outcome of it.

**Key Words:** Biyanaams, Marginalization, patriarchy, identity.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The presentation of women is always an interesting topic of literary discussion, especially in a patriarchal society. The place is occupied by the female often. Considered as the inner one where their function is limited within the four walls of the household, various feminist scholars like Simon de Bevoire already discussed the place of women in a patriarchal society as 'Second sex.' Gayatri Spivak presented the marginalized identity of the females, their voice as the subaltern. Women were often pushed to marginalized positions, and their ability was often ignored. The study of folksongs opens a new evaluation of the 'space' of women in society. As we all know through the folklore and folksongs, one can trace a world of art that expresses the

human world, encompassing histories, culture, tradition, and other socio-religious practices, myths, legends, etc.

One such expression full of socio-cultural impacts and practices is Biyanams or marriage songs of Assamese society. These are the creation of the womenfolk of the village who had already experienced the 'domestic life', gone through the structures of the 'patriarchal society.' Nevertheless, they put their unheard, ignored voice in the form of these songs and let their inner world follow in the public gathering, along with which they also express about various rituals of the society and their significance—this paper intended to evaluate that 'space of women as reflected in these biyanams.

## **2. OBJECTIVES**

The main objectives of the study-

- I) the space of women in a patriarchal society and stereotypes attached to them.
- ii) projection of the 'inner space.'

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

In the process of preparing the paper, participatory analytical methods are being adopted. Information and data have been taken from various semi-formal interviews, books, and journals etc.

## **4. DESCRIPTION**

### **4.1. Marriage in Assamese Society:**

'Marriage' is the most celebrated social activity of Assamese Society. There are two types of marriages found in Assamese Society. 'Tuloni Biya, one celebrates when a girl first experiences her 'womanhood.' The other one is 'Bor-Biya, one that tied not only two persons but two families by the Society to start a 'family.' The concept of tuloni biya is attached to the menstrual issue, often considered as taboo and lots of restrictions associated with it. In most societies, it is found to be avoided in public discussion, shame and tried to hide from the men and even among the women they use a code word to talk about menstruation. But the 'bor biya' is the most celebrated one, where a man and a woman are tied together in a socially acknowledged manner. There are various rituals like juron diya, pani tula and so on. Every ritual followed by a certain song depicts the various meaning and importance and provides various information regarding the coming life. The woman folk of the village played a major role in such singing known as Namoti and these songs are known as 'Biyanam.'

### **4.2. Marriage Songs:**

As it was mentioned before, the marriage songs carried various explanations of rituals related to marriage. Apart from that, these marriage songs had varied other interpretations too. Though women play an equal role in society yet in a patriarchal society, women are often considered inferior. Their ability is often ignored and restricted within the four walls only. Their space is deemed to be private, and Society marginalizes their voices.

Similarly, these things can be a trace in Assamese Society too. The women invented a way to present their voices, express their feelings through these marriage songs. These marriage songs are the creation of the illiterate women folk of the society, where they put their experiences, their marginalized territory in a lyrical manner. Through these songs, they express various structures of the patriarchal society, tried to question the 'identity' of women which is being imposed upon them. These can 'be specifically called as women songs where women voice their inner world.'<sup>1</sup> Apart from being the song with ritualistic importance, these songs carry various other significant aspects regarding women's space in a patriarchal society. This paper attempts to evaluate the 'space' lived by womenfolk concerning the selected biyanaams sung in both types of marriages.

#### 4.2.1. Tuloni Biya:

As mentioned before, tuloni biya is the celebration of a girl achieving puberty. According to the rituals, when a girl attained puberty, she had to go through isolation for a period of seven days or more. This is the turning point for every girl in the Assamese household. In Assamese society a girl introduced to different notions as 'menstrual blood is considered inherently dirty and the contact with it in any form is discouraged'<sup>1</sup> brings a lots of trouble in the life of the girl. From the song given below, it's become clear-

O dear,

Your friends are now left behind

You reached this stage this you go, dear

You're in deep trouble now

All these seven days, our dear has been in trouble

But now she is out, and we're here for her.

Our dear is so young, and she has reached youth already.

Wouldn't it be wise to think of her marriage now?

As it is portrayed in this song achieving puberty is a 'trouble' for a woman. Because along with that, lots of restrictions are going to be imposed upon her. Every month she has to go through a purification process. During the time of menstruation, the female is considered untouchable and impure; she cannot conduct herself in the usual manner. If a girl is getting late compared to her contemporary girls in gaining puberty, she has to go through much criticism. Instead of considering the issue from the nutritional or medical point of view often the subject is pushed to the position of disgrace. Even after getting puberty, one cannot live a criticism-free life. As long as she reached her womanhood, the next question she has to face is finding a groom for her. The meaning and identity of women narrowed down to achieving puberty and finding a suitable boy for her. And her afterlife will be surrounded by the four walls of the

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<sup>1</sup> Mzumdar, Chandra Nath. 'Importance of folklore in human life: A Study on Assamese Marriage Songs (Biyanam)'. P. 34

household. Taking from the explanation of Simon de Beauvoir 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman'. In the Assamese society the same thing happens. A girl is introduced to her identity as a woman through various structures. Gradually her functions are controlled by the center of the society, and she is placed in a specific space with limited functions.

#### 4.2.2 Bor Biya

The other type of marriage through which a man and a woman are socially tied together is known as the 'bor biya' in Assamese society. It is a ceremony full of various rituals and rituals followed by some distinct song that explains the significance of that ritual. These rituals 'marriage songs' are categorized into 'juron,' 'pani tula', 'murat tel diya', 'gathiyen khunda' and many more. But suiting the paper's primary objective, which is to find the space of women in Assamese society, a conscious selection has been made. Apart from explaining the rituals, the namotis also prepare the bride how to cope to the in-laws house, for example-

O Aideu kandile ki Hobo sansarore niyam o

Aideu maniboi lagibo

Suwalir Jibont,. O aideu kandile ki hobo

Xodai jironiya, aideu kandile ki Hobo.

Xodai poror adheen. O aideu kandile ki Hobo,

O aideu sansarore niyam maniboi lagibo,

Janmor ghore ari ... jabo je lagibo.

The translated meaning will be that, oh daughter, there is no use of crying; you have to obey the rules of nature. A girl's life is always temporary; she only lives in her parent's house a few times. As soon as she grew up, she has to leave for her husband's place. All these things come with the life of a girl. This song shows the 'identity and existence of a girl in Assamese society. The various factors of society always dominate the identity she has. Getting married and changing place and identity from someone's daughter to someone's wife are the bound things for a girl.

Another fine Biya Naam where the bride is acquainted with her role as the wife goes like:

O Joymoti, Jerenga patharot Tejere Rangoli

Kaite Futile, Surate dalile, teo Joymoti Soi nakahile

Bhabisaba Aieu narir Jibonot

Swamir bahire kono nai sansarot.

In this song, a reference has been made to Sati Joymoti, who sacrificed her life for her husband. As the song says, sati Joymoti went through lots of torture in the hands of Lalukhula Barphukan but never uttered a single word regarding her husband. In this universe, there is no

one a wife got apart from her husband. And considering that she needs to be ready to devote her life to the comfort and longevity of her husband. Once a woman got married, her husband became the center of her life; she revolves around him and his desire.

Another one goes like this:

Maar ghoror jetiyaa ulisaree tetiaya,

saahu ghorot jetiyaa xutar kapur atiyaa.

Uli saree xaadhiba gali khabao Paari aa,

somoniyya baodeur kothaao xuniba.

Baideur logot xaabodhane soliba

Saahu hole nosuwai, kosu khale Khajuwai.

Somoniyya nanad hole kothai poti konduwai.

Through this song, a picturesque drawn by comparing two lives of a woman. When she was at her parents' place, she can ask for valuable stuff like a woolen saree, but she cannot show tantrums in her in-law's house. If she tries to do that, there is a chance of her getting scold. She was also suggested to watch the steps while mingling with her contemporary women. Putting the illusion of eating 'arum' the complex situation on her in law's place made clear. Arum is beneficial for health, but it also causes unbearable itching on a person's body. Similarly, when there is a sister-in-law of the same age, it also gives some bitter experiences. On the other hand, the mother-in-law trying to mold the bride to her expectations often makes the bride dance in her tone. So the responsibility is limited to her husband's life and pleasure. She took the hardships of fulfilling the expectations of her in-laws and has to adjust with the contemporary womenfolk.

Another finest example of the indicative of aftermath of married life-

Laophol singute singil laokoli

Singil muriyaalor jori.

Monor ghura haji furibo nuwaru

Bharjya hol ghusaamaar jori.

Though this song presents the groom's side, picking the flower of the water guard mistakenly picked the immature water guard. As the groom is getting married, he can't do whatever he wants to do anymore, as his wife will be there to control his movements. The responsibility of his wife is going to tie around the husband's neck, and it is considered the way of curtailing the freedom of the man.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Marriage is the most celebrated and joyful ceremony as well as it is very heart-touching that the bride has to leave for the new household as it is the rule of nature. Adding to that mixed

feeling, biyanaams put some fun and melodic tone to the entire movement. These biyanaams are sung by those women who already experienced the rituals of marriage and through these songs they tried to project their experiences in a public space. As we all know, the females were always placed in the corner and their voices cannot cross the household walls. But the feminist study of folksongs opens a new way of looking at these songs. The study of folksongs always brings various information regarding the socio-cultural practices of a community. The space of women, their mental status reflects through these songs. One such kind of song biyanaams also plays a crucial role in displaying women's emotions and mental level, especially in a patriarchal society. Through their intellectual ability, mental strength, women take care of the family and maintain the pride and dignity of the family. Yet they are often left behind and their ability is neglected when it's come to the participation in various significant works of the society.

Their identity is always determined by the male members of the family like daughter, sister, mother, wife to someone. Along with the identity, they were given certain space within which they had to function. Stepping out of that boundary is considered a disgrace to the identity of a woman. One has to move according to the rules set by the dominant part of the society. It's not like the men put these restrictions on them, but the women themselves play the role of the agents of patriarchy. Women criticized women and curtailed their ability in the name of rules and regulations. Various songs speak about how mother-in-law, sister-in-law impose various restrictions upon the bride, makes her life miserable. In order to sustain a family, the bride has to take care of the demands and needs of her husband, expectations of her in-laws. Despite these, her misery never ends; her space is no longer a remains of her own. She lost her existence among the responsibilities of family and countless expectations of society. For the bride, her husband became the world and taking care of him is the soul duty she has to perform.

Through these biyanaams these women find a way to express their grief and miseries. They also try to question the structures through which their freedom is curtailed, and their space is often ignored. By drawing references from various mythological stories, they make their conditions and ideas universal appeal to easily connect to them even though he(s) is not a dweller of Assamese household. Moreover, various allusions and metaphors used in these biyanaams gave broader scope of interpretation.

This world of marginalized, ignored, identity lessness of women strats changing. As womenfolk became educated, they started knowing about their rights and freedom and started getting the courage to protest against their exploitation of the womenfolk suffering for so long. And society also went through various changes with the changes of time. Different rigid rules, superstitions were wiped by the light of education and enlightenment. People started being more flexible towards the rules and regulations of family, society. A similar approach towards men and women can be seen in community even if they follow the patriarchal notion.

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<sup>i</sup> Patar, Maitrayee. 'Tuloni: experienes and negotiations around womenhood in assamese society.' P. 69

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