

Constructing Female Identity in Consanguineal and Affinal Relationships: A Study through Select Assamese Proverbs

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Abstract: The paper intends to study how the stereotypical role of women is constructed in society and how it is represented in Assamese proverbs. Construction of womanhood is accepted as a natural fact through the patriarchal lens and nobody rejects such phenomenon. Such kind of construction can be seen in terms of kinship. The paper intends to study such representation in the context of kinship and it tries to make a comparative study of women's representation as Consanguineal kin and Affinal kin. For that matter, the paper deals with select proverbs in Assamese which have relevance with the Consanguineal and Affinal relationships.

Keywords: Femininity, consanguinity, affinity, Assamese proverbs.

Female identity always seems to be subjugated and dominated by the male members of the society. Women have been given a second position in society. The biological male and female are constructed by patriarchy as masculine and feminine as if these concepts were natural given in society. In the words of Philippa Gates:

Masculinity, like femininity, is a product of culture, not of nature: it is constructed and performed. There remains an assumption, even in contemporary society, that gender differences are innate and reflect an underlying dichotomy between men and women based on sexual difference. The assumption arises from conflating biological sex with gender: sex - male/female - is biologically determined; conversely, gender - masculinity/femininity - is a social construction (28).

Women do not have voice not only in the public sphere but also in the private sphere. They do not have the decision making power and they are categorised as the 'other'. The marginalized position of the women can be seen in every dimension of society and kinship is one of such examples. In kinship relationship, women have been observed as an oppressed group in comparison to their male counterparts. But it is interesting that apart from such divisions between male and female status, there are divisions between different women in their different roles. It is seen that women having blood relation generally gets a higher stature than that of women having marital relationship. Such type of divisions is well-represented in various genres of both oral and written literature along with the day to day practices. Folklore is one of the important mediums through which such kind of comparison can be expressed. The present paper deals with the images of women that are projected in verbal folklore and for that matter, it concentrates only on select proverbs in Assamese. The paper deals with

proverbs to examine construction of female identity in the context of kinship and it tries to make a comparative study of the Consanguineal and Affinal relationship in reference to women. The paper intends to observe how women are represented in the proverbs throwing light on the different kinship relationships prevalent in the Assamese society. It is also interesting to come up with a comparative note on the two aspects of such kinship terms. According to S.C. Dube, "Kinship denotes the recognition of relatives either through a blood relationship (technically called "consanguinity") or through marriage (in the language of anthropology and sociology called "affinity")" (80). It is quite interesting to mark that women, playing the role of consanguine relationships generally get more advantageous position than those of affine, e.g., women in the roles of mothers and daughters are, to some extent, given much more respect in comparison to the women as mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, sisters-in-law and so on and so forth. We can visibly realise such distinctions as represented in the Assamese proverbs as well as sayings. The present discussion begins with the role of mothers and the mothers-in-law.

Proverbs associated with Mother and Mother-in-Law: It is quite obvious that the role of mother is a kinship term which belongs to the consanguine relationship, i.e. it is a relationship of blood. It is seen that women in the role of the mother enjoy a more prestigious position in society than any other roles that they play. Such ideology of glorifying mothers is well-represented in the proverbs in Assamese language. Mothers are considered to be the makers of the society as they are the creators of the future generation. While talking about construction of womanhood, two concepts come to our mind – fertility and reproduction. Both these concepts are directly related to the concept of motherhood. Therefore, it cannot be compared with any other roles played by women. It is believed that the period of attaining motherhood is the best period of every woman's life and every woman is expected to perform such a role. Almost all the time she is held in high esteem by the members of the family, e.g. *Air saman haba kon? Nair saman baba kon?* Here a mother is compared with the river. It is a universal truth that river is eternal, its flow never stops. Likewise, a mother is beyond comparison, her love and affection never dry. This proverb obviously glorifies the mother. It goes without saying that the mother always thinks of her children's well-being. A proverb records this concept as follows: *Make cai mukhalai, Ghainie cai hata lai.* Mothers are known to be caring and sympathetic towards their children. They have only good will for them. The children vice-versa have a kind of emotional bondage with their mothers. They in their childhood get trouble without their mothers' helping hands. Such bondage is clearly reflected in many proverbial expressions. Mother's concern is always towards the welfare of her children but it is said that the wife's concern is towards her husband's property. Thus mother is depicted as incomparable character in her approaches. Again another proverb regarding mother goes like this:

Dhui pakhali kolat lai, | Tèo bole tai.
Mari dhari batat thai, | Tèo bole ai

This proverb speaks about the deep love that a mother has for her children. Children feel naturally drawn towards their mother and no one act as a substitute for her. In proverbs, sayings or such other expressive genres a mother is always compared with God. Sometimes, it is said that to worship one's own mother is equal to worshiping God. The mythical story of goddess Parvati and her son Lord Ganesha can prove that giving regard to one's mother is equivalent to worshiping God. The very same concept is also reflected in the proverbial expression-*Makar bharir talat swarga*. It means heaven is at mother's feet. This proverb is a glaring example of metaphoric expression. By this proverb, one can understand that mother is placed in the highest position in the world. In contrast to the portrait of mother, the mother-in-law is generally represented as a negative character. We commonly see that there is a mixed feeling towards the role of the mother-in-law as represented in the proverbs and sayings. There are some proverbs which depict mother-in-law in a positive light, e.g. *Khabi ahur, khabi sahur, Khabi atar, khabi katar*. It is said that there are some sweet or pleasant things in the world. Things offered by mother-in-law are among them. It shows the affection that a mother-in-law has for her son-in-law and daughter-in-law and in this way her role is glorified. Again another proverb goes like this: *Mace garaka anja khaba, Sahu garaka bowari baba*. It means that the daughter-in-law trained by a mother-in-law is like a fish curry cooked with vegetables. Mother-in-law, here, is given much importance. But as we have already said that there is a varied feeling towards the mother-in-law which is reflected in Assamese proverbs. There are some proverbs which treat a mother-in-law as a bad-mannered and cruel person.

Kacu hale khajurwai, Sahu hale nacuwai. People are allergic to *kacu*, the arum plant, which causes an itching sensation. Likewise, a mother-in-law makes her daughter-in-law dance to the tune of her music. Here the mother-in-law is depicted as a dangerous lady. Though we do find instances of similar references being made to the father-in-law, these are far rarer. In general, there are a host of references to the dubious role played by the mother-in-law who is always seeking excuses to torture her daughter-in-law: *Kinu kam sahu air gun, Ehate kharani, ehate lon*. This proverb literally means that the mother-in-law is always more than eager to torture her daughter-in-law at the slightest pretext. Thus, the stereotypical image of the mother-in-law is that of a dangerous and sadistic woman who never misses out on any opportunity to humiliate and punish her daughter-in-law.

Proverbs associated with Daughter and Daughter-in-Law: A daughter is depicted as affectionate and pretty and she seems to be the cause of happiness in an Assamese family. It is said that to arrange the daughter's marriage and to assign her responsibility to another person (the groom) is a sacred act. Here is an example: *Grihe dane pai nari sundari, Kanya dane pai Indrar puri*. By giving one's daughter to another person in marriage one achieves heavenly pleasure. *Khai la khai la | Nau sahurilai jautei, Sui la sui la | Nau po-ji pautei*. This means that a girl is happier before her marriage than after. She has been living peacefully and happily in her

parents' home. But once she is married, she is bound to encounter many problems. So a girl is generally advised to enjoy her life before marriage because there is no assurance regarding the possibility of such happiness after her marriage. Thus, this is a kind of warning to a girl about the troublesome and miserable life that awaits her after marriage. This proverb refers to the changing roles in the life of a woman. There are some proverbs which depict the daughter-in-law in a gloomy frame and show how she is tortured by her in-laws. It is said that to be a daughter is easier than a daughter-in-law because the latter has to follow the rules and regulations in the family as well as in the whole society. A proverb regarding this concept is like this: *Jiyari habalai keteбели, Bowari habalai tan*. It would be tough for a daughter-in-law to survive in a family where even the daughter is not spared the rod. When a daughter is beaten, the daughter-in-law will automatically be frightened by the torture of her in-laws. In this way a daughter-in-law may be controlled by her in-laws as can be seen in the following proverb: *Betik mari bowarik cakowva*. Variation, *Betik mari bowarik darowva* (To scare the daughter-in-law by beating one's own daughter.) During the collection of this proverb from the field I got two types of literal meaning of this particular proverb. There were informants who said that the term *beti* refers to the daughter but some of the other informants who referred it as the maid. If it is maid then the interpretation may be like this - to scare the daughter-in-law by beating the maid of the house. Another proverb goes like this: *Burha kathalar murha, Jakarowva gharalai cowali nidiba | Dhekie kariba burha*. (A daughter-in-law is subjected to greater tortures if there are many members in her in-laws' house.)

From the above discussion, we can observe that a girl enjoys peace and happiness before her marriage but she may be tortured by her in-laws after marriage. Proverbs generally present a dark picture of the life of a daughter-in-law. The last three proverbs cast a pale of gloom over the life of a woman after her marriage. It is said that she will have to follow lots of rules and regulations as a daughter-in-law and she has to set aside all her happiness in her parents' home, and she will also be controlled by her in-laws. In other words, a daughter will have to lose all her freedom that she had enjoyed in her parents' home. The practical wisdom offered by these proverbs is that the best period for a woman to enjoy her life is that before marriage. After examining some of the Assamese proverbs regarding various roles of woman, we can have some idea about the images of mother vis-à-vis mother-in-law and daughter vis-à-vis daughter-in-law as represented in Assamese proverbs. As we know that kinship has two types- one is 'consanguinity', i.e.; people having blood relationship and the other is 'affinity', i.e.; people come to be related through marriage. Hence we can find out the reason for these different statuses of women from the point of view of the terms of kinship. From the above discussion, we are able to understand that between the two types of kinship system, the former seems to be represented in a 'good' way in proverbs. But the second kind of kinship is always marked by a sense of distrust. After the above discussion, it is seen that mother as the consanguine kin, is represented as a noble character but on the other hand, mother-in-law, as

the affine kin, is projected either as decent or as cruel character. Similarly daughter belongs to the Consanguineal kin and is therefore, represented as a sweet and innocent person but the daughter-in-law being a member of affinity, is represented either as a tragic character whose life is bereft of happiness and peace or as conniving and manipulative. While comparing these roles of women on the basis of kinship terms, it is seen that there is a hierarchical order between the two types of kinship relationship. It is based on consanguinity and affinity in the whole Assamese society as has been reflected in proverbs, e.g. *Make cai mukhalai, Ghainie cai hatalai*. Here it is seen that on the one hand the mother is glorified by comparing her role with that of the wife who is an affinal kin. At the same time, the wife is depicted as materialistic and without any concern for her husband's welfare. However, it is the male perspective that moulds women into a particular framework according to their own needs. Women are, therefore, always projected in a certain structure which is not free from patriarchal value judgment. In fact the politics of representing the mother figure in a glorified manner may have relation with the reproduction system. Women are represented as the sex symbols in the society and hence reproduction is supposed to be their main function. For that very reason, the mother figure is assigned an esteemed position. According to Nancy J. Chodorow:

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

Proverbs contain keys to the understanding of the culture of a certain community. Such knowledge can help us in getting ideas about power structures, social hierarchies and important norms of that particular society. It is important to study proverb as a folklore genre because being a part of language, it is deeply influenced by ideological practices of a society. Moreover, the text of the proverbs is considered to be the creation of the masses, which are orally handed down from generation after generation. It is said that proverbs are basically commonsensical knowledge and we all have to accept that commonsensical knowledge have much impact on the people's psyche. Therefore, it is easier to establish the social norms among the people through proverbs.

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