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Chapter

Sexism, Language, and Women: A Study of Some Proverbial Expressions Used in the Barpeta District of Assam, India

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Abstract

Today, issues related to gender and sexism in language have received unprecedented critical attention, because the language used to represent women in our society is typically gendered. A woman often faces different nuances of gender stereotyping to which one is exposed since one's childhood—at home, in the locality, in schools and in the day-to-day social exchanges. Hence, there is an urgent need to explore the emotional, domestic, cultural and social territories as well as the personal spaces of women and discuss how in our society, the politics of language influences our perceptions about women. This paper is based on an area specific research conducted on the sexist proverbial expressions on women by the Assamese speaking people of the Barpeta district of the state of Assam, India. The research is based on locally available secondary sources. Proverbial expressions treating women negatively are only used as part of the research. The important finding of the research is that the embodiment of sexism in the proverbial expressions in Assam often assign an inferior status to women and that, from local to global, biasness against women is still widespread despite rising awareness about the politics of language in a homosocial world.

Keywords: sexist language, gender, Assamese women, proverbs on women, politics of language

1. Introduction

When we use language, besides communicating our individual thoughts, beliefs, and practices, it also reflects our social life, character, beliefs and practices of the community to which we belong. It is also through language that we express our attitudes, manners, likes, and dislikes as well as the different social norms to which we must conform. It is however not for nothing that our “cultural literacy” often essentializes verbal harassments and abuse of women on the basis of sex, leading to the use of certain stereotypical terms against woman. For example, expressions like crazy woman, fallen woman, flaunting woman of bold spirit but lose moral, woman of dangerous blandishments, woman of villainous and ungovernable temper, debauched woman,

woman disdaining all womankind, infamous woman, slovenly woman, spiteful-violent-tyrannical woman, dragoness and what not are most common across all languages and cultures. The debateable point is that such expressions are systematically used to deprive the women folk of certain privileges and even to deny their rightful place in the social hierarchy. The French feminist critic Luce Irigaray, in around 1970s, popularized the concept of linguistic sexism and since then there developed a more complex view of gender as “socially constructed” and as a set of relationships between men and women.

Even today, the proverb “Frailty, thy name is woman!” from Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* is used to mean that women are weaker than or inferior to men because they are frail. Similarly, a woman is likened to a walnut tree as can be found in the common proverb—“A woman, a spaniel, and a walnut tree.” The pervasive belief is that the walnut tree thrives best if the nuts are beaten off with sticks or are to be manured by beating, or else would not bear fruits. However, the point is that such a view also implies the politics of male dominance and male chauvinism in linguistic exchanges in various walks of life. In the German language, there is a common saying that “As the country so the proverbs” which means that the geographical location, religious customs, psychology of the people concerned, economic, social and cultural setup of a place, etc., immensely influence the development of language as well as the use of proverbial expressions. However, the point I am trying to make in this paper is that many proverbs on women and womanhood in the Assamese society, like in case of many other societies and cultures across the world, are innately gendered.

2. Methodology

This paper is based on an area-based study of how sexist language is so blatantly used in Barpeta—a district of lower Assam, although the focus of the paper shall be on certain specific social contexts of proverbial expressions where women are negatively implicated and where specific proverbs are purposively used to negate the position of women as a whole in the Assamese society. While writing this paper, some secondary sources were consulted and efforts had been made to check how gender discrimination in terms of language finds expression in two different ways—through the proverbial languages used by women and through the proverbs used to describe a woman. It is however important to note that in both cases, the inherent sexism is too overriding in the Assamese linguistic expressions. This is a dangerous social phenomenon as the “man-made” sexist language has often been used as a powerful tool to consolidate gender differences following which women or the weaker sex have been consistently relegated to a marginal status in the affairs of our society. For writing this paper, only locally available works published in the Assamese language from the state of Assam were consulted to collect the proverbs cited in this paper, and the theoretical perspective needed for discussing the findings were derived from the works of critics like L Irigaray, M Z Rosaldo, and M Schipper. Most of such local cultural resources are unknown to the outside world as these are not yet been translated into English, and only region-specific studies or area-based studies, like in case of the current study, can make them available for further research.

3. Sexism in language

In nearly all societies, sex status is an unavoidable evil as it fixes women’s role and limits their autonomy in society, although linguistic sexism is actually based on

real-life social inequality between men and women. For a woman to be virtuous, she must be beautiful, obedient, sacrificial, and sexually pure, and when these “feminine” virtues are missing, her very “womanhood” is questionable. Rosaldo stated that the biological role of women in reproduction and the socially and culturally defined role of women as mothers, bearers, and nurturers of children provide the basis for their subordination in society. [1] The French feminist critic Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which is Not One* states: Women’s social inferiority is reinforced and complicated by the fact that woman does not have access to language, except through recourse to “masculine” systems of representation which dissociates her from her relation to herself and to other women. The “feminine” is never to be identified except by and for the masculine, the reciprocal proposition not being “true” [2] According to Irigaray, women are forced to assume the roles prescribed for her by the male-dominated patriarchal ethos. She, like many of her counterparts, including Helen Cixous, believed that language typically excludes women from an active “subject position,” which has always been hampering in the liberation of women in the true sense.

Linguistic sexism, or how women are described through words, can be best explored in terms of the proverbs people use in our society. A proverb is a well-known saying that states a general truth or issue an advice. As Hirsch et al. mentioned, proverbs are short, pithy sayings that reflect the accumulated wisdom, prejudices, and superstitions of the human race. [3] Now, it may be argued that most of the proverbs which are in circulation in our society are misogynous in nature as they express innately chauvinistic ideas of sexual stereotypes. Common proverbs such as “A woman’s tongue wags like a lamb’s tail,” “Diamonds are a girl’s best friend,” “A woman’s place is in the home,” “A bad wife is poor harvest for sixty years,” and “Beware of a bad woman and put no trust in a good one” are still uttered widely in different cultures of the world even in the twenty first century.

However, it is never so correct to state that all proverbial sayings are gendered. As Schipper states, proverbs, the world’s smallest literary genre, are a most telling part of that serial narrative about humankind as in case with oral literatures, myths and origin stories, fairy tales, animal fables, love poems, or cradle songs. Such oral “wisdom,” transmitted from generation to generation, represents a fascinating cultural history. [4] Then, he also mentions that “proverbs wholeheartedly acknowledge procreation as an indispensable female quality, and motherhood as a crucial domain of life. Being able to give birth is apparently considered so unique that numerous proverbs express not only respect but also fear *vis-a-vis* this awesome creativity.” (p. 16) Schipper further mentions

The legacy of oral traditions is a moral one: it teaches people what to do or what to think in a given situation. They formulate some part of common sense, values, and ways of doing. Endowed with authority, proverbs, like other prestigious oral and written texts, present how things ought to be from certain perspectives. Such authoritative views have contributed to molding people’s roles and identities and continue to have an impact in many ways. Although we hardly ever know whether the original creator of a particular proverb was male or female, we can consider the interests at stake. What these interests are and how they are expressed in particular cultures—rhetorically and thematically—are questions to be born in mind when looking into proverbs about women... (p. 17)

It is important also to note that the subject of a particular proverb and its variants in one particular culture and language often exist in other regions as well. One

may wonder how this co-incidence is possible. A researcher like Schipper, however, believes that certain standard patterns exist in the attribution of status and the division of labor, which in a way are the cause of such similarities. As he states,

In virtually all societies men fare better than women. Men exercise more power, have more status, and enjoy more freedom. Men usually head the family, exercise considerably more force in legal, political, and religious matters, take alternative sexual partners, may often take more than one wife, have greater freedom in the choice of a spouse, usually reside near their own kin, and have easier access to alcoholic beverages and drugs. Women, on the other hand, are often segregated or avoided during menstruation, must often share their husbands with one or more co-wives, are blamed for childlessness, and are often forced to defer to men in public places. Child rearing is the only domain where women regularly exert more influence than men. (p. 11)

However, the idea of a woman being segregated by men is vehemently challenged by many feminist critics who tend to opine that the man-made language is used largely to entrap women under patriarchy where the role of a woman is dictated by a peculiar kind of male chauvinism.

Let me here refer to some common proverbial expressions used against women by the people in different parts of the world where the use of sexist language is clearly visible, because in most cases, a woman is negatively implicated and her self-respect and authority have been seriously denied.

- a. The tears of an adulteress are ever ready. (Egyptian) [5] (p. 6)
- b. It more becomes a woman to be silent than to talk. (Roman) [5] (p. 30)
- c. Choose neither a woman nor linen by candlelight. (English) [5] (p. 55)
- d. April weather, woman's love, rose leaves, dice, and luck at cards, change every moment. (German) [5] (p. 61)
- e. Where the Devil cannot go himself, he sends an old woman. (German) [5] (p. 102)
- f. A store-house of evil is a woman if she is depraved. (Roman) [5] (p. 131)
- g. It is safer to irritate a dog than an old woman. (Roman) [5] (p. 235)
- h. The jealousy of a woman sets a whole house aflame. (Roman) [5] (p. 236)
- i. A goose, a woman, and a goat are bad things lean. (Portuguese) [5] (p. 253)
- j. Who's the man that was never fooled by a woman? (German) [5] (p. 279)
- k. No woman stays happily married without paying a price for it. (Spanish) [5] (p. 282)
- l. A whistling woman and a crowing hen are neither fit for God nor men. (Roman) [5] (p. 309)

- m. No one rejoices more in revenge than a woman. (Roman) [5] (p. 361)
- n. Three things without rule: a woman, a pig, and a mule. (Irish) [5] (p. 370)
- o. A ship and a woman are ever repairing. (English) [5] (p. 387)
- p. When a woman weeps, she is setting traps with her tears. (Roman) [5] (p. 424)
- q. A truth-telling woman has few friends. (Danish) [5] (p. 444)
- r. Woman is a torment, but let no home be without torment. (Persian) [5] (p. 480)
- s. Women are like shoes; they can always be replaced. (Rajasthani). [4] (p. 26)
- t. Women are like busses: if one leaves, another one will come. (Spanish, Venezuela) [4] (p. 26)
- u. “Never trust a woman, even after she has given you seven sons” (Japanese)? [4] (p. 27)

From these examples, it becomes apparent that a large number of proverbs transmit exactly the same idea. Some proverb specialists argue that a proverb acquires its concrete contextual meaning at the very moment it is used. As new shades of meaning are added each time a proverb is quoted, the very process of meaning creation must be carefully studied. Nonetheless, proverbs about women usually represent a dominant view. [4] (p. 29) The same can be seen in case of the Assamese proverbs too as sought to be discussed in this paper.

Kalita, while discussing the use of sexist language in the Indian School Textbooks, brought in an interesting discussion about the issue of sexism and language. With a view to defining sexist language, he quoted from an answer provided by Vetterling-Braggin: “A word or sentence is sexist if ... its use creates, constitutes, promotes, or exploits an unfair or irrelevant distinction between the sexes...[and] if its use contributes to, pro- motes, causes or results in the oppression of either sex.” [6] (p. 794). Kalita brings in an interesting discussion about the issue of sexism and language, as can be found in the following:

Sexist terminology distinguishes between people purely on the basis of biology. It defines the “masculine” or “feminine” labels attached to roles, statuses, ideas, behaviors, activities, and condemns those who in any way overstep the bounds of their sex role stereotypes. Sexism in language allows an ideology to legitimize the prescriptions and appraisals of every human endeavor solely on the basis of gender. Language uses us as much as we use language; so, sexist language vents, spreads, and reinforces sex role stereotypes...Sexist language conveys prejudice through the everyday vocabulary used in social intercourse. Many gender-related words metaphorically insult or belittle women by identifying them as children, animals, or objects: girl (used in reference to a woman), “baby,” “dish,” “chick,” “hot tomato,” “bitch,” (“son of a bitch” for men), “dog,” “sugar,” etc. Exclusion involves the creation of sex-based names, terms, and expressions to characterize essentially sex-neutral positions, occupations, etc. Through exclusionary devices, sexist language restrains one gender from pursuing activities similar to those allowed the other gender in the same society. Words such as “chairman,” “foreman,” and

“fisherman,” exclude women by calling to mind male actors, thus, implicitly eliminating qualified women from consideration in these positions and occupations. (pp. 3-4)

There is no doubt about the fact that in the twenty first century, when women across the world are expressing their discomfit with the excessive use of sexist language in nearly all types of social dealings, almost no detailed or systematic studies have been done on the issue of sexism in the Assamese language in a state like Assam.

4. Sexism in context-specific proverbs in the Barpeta district of Assam

Barpeta, one of the prominent districts of lower Assam, is known for its great and ancient religious traditions. Previously known by different names such as—Tatikuchi, Porabhita, Mathura, Vrindavan, Choukhutisthan, Iccha Kuchi, Kampur, and so on, Barpeta is renowned as the “Land of the Satras” in the whole of Assam that bear the testimony of the great Assamese reformer, saint, scholar, and cultural exponent Srimanta Sankardeva and his great disciple Shri Shri Madhabdeva who set their foot in lower Assam long back in the sixteenth century to lay the strong foundation of the Assamese culture and language in the region through their socio-religious Vaishnavite Reform Movement. Although this Movement left a historic legacy and although revolutionary changes were initiated in the society by their successor saints and holy personalities, the place called Barpeta is still suffering from various ills as the society has remained too insular and conservative. Even today, women are not allowed to enter the main “Sattrā” premise or the “Kirtanghar,” leaving a big scar on the face of the society and inviting debates regarding the relevance of age-old religious norms and customs set by the male-dominated patriarchal setup which are used to deprive the women folk.

Throughout the last few centuries, the Assamese cultural setup in the Barpeta district has been found to be innately patriarchal. Even today, it is very common that the birth of a male child is a matter of great joy to the family, while just the opposite happens when a female child is born because people believe that “Poror babei Janme Bala”—meaning “A girl is born only to serve others.” It is however not for nothing that the belief is so persistent among the people of Barpeta, that most of such belief and views are self-degenerating. Because, in order to marry a daughter to a “man,” the poor parents would need a huge amount of money; whereas, it is assumed that a son would continue his father’s dynasty and look after his parents even in their old age. This belief is so fundamental to the day-to-day existence of the common people that even the would-be mother desires for a boy child before delivery of the child. In this regard, several other proverbs carry similar undertones.

- a. “Aapa Soli Moijar Mati/Api Soli Dhokonar Kati”—meaning “The son is the earth of the floor; the daughter the sheath of the betel-nut tree.”
- b. “Beta Dhaan/Beti Pataan”—meaning “The son is the paddy; the daughter the seedless pod.”
- c. “Bamnor Baarir Lai/Kaethor Sagale Khai”—meaning “Vegetables in the kitchen garden of a Brahmin are consumed by goats owned by lower castes.” Here, a girl from a low caste getting married to a high-caste boy is implied.

- d. “Beta holi dhar suje/Beti Holi Nai”—meaning “The son pays for what parents owe; the daughter doesn’t.”
- e. “Putra Sukhor Chitto/Kanya Dukhor Chitto”—meaning “The son is the heart of happiness; the daughter of sorrow.”
- f. “Jee ti Lokor/Po ti Bukor”—meaning “The daughter is for others; the son for the heart.”
- g. “Bohu Putri, Kulor Naraki”—meaning “Having numerous daughters is like the Hell falling over the dynasty.”

Thus, from since birth, a girl child is destined for a secondary role in the Assamese society, and she is often pushed into a bleak future as the parents believe that “Jome Nileu Nia/Jowai Nileu Nia”—meaning “Marrying the daughter to a man is no different from submitting her to Yama, the God of death”—marriage being her final destiny. However, such proverbial utterances render negative connotations on the society as a whole, as such sayings have been affecting the murder of female fetus, murder of the daughters and daughters-in-laws, and the increase in the population growth in the hope of a male heir.

For the purpose of the paper, the following are some of the selected contexts in which case-specific proverbial expressions are used to imply a girl or a woman. In these examples, the way of uttering the expressions is very unique to the local people of Barpeta. Although, in most cases, the male member is to blame, yet it is the woman who always suffers or is made to suffer in the face of the patriarchal social dictum. A woman’s actual experiences reside in obscurity, while the language used to describe her ends up with further discrimination. Some of the proverbs cited here are taken from Kalita [6] and Das [7]. However, some of them are also in circulation in other parts of the Indian state of Assam. It is pertinent to note here that in the absence of English translations, such proverbs are not known to the world outside Assam. Whereas the fact is that the experiences derived from such a vast gamut of proverbs would add more impetus to undertake newer researches on the politics of language in general where gender discrimination is clearly visible.

5. Context 1: perceptions about wives

In different parts of the Barpeta district, there is a great pervasiveness of various common proverbs and proverbial utterances which deny the rightful place to “wives” in general. Some proverbs, on wives, present a negative idea of the women further justifying their differences from men or husband as in case of the following colloquial expressions where the term “tiri” means “wife”:

- a. “Tiri Boiri, Sima Boiri”—meaning “Like neighbours, the wife is also the rival.”
- b. “Tirir Kotha Sune Jito/Odhogati Jai Sito”—meaning “He who listens to his wife, is bound to fall.” Such expressions are common in other parts of the state too.
- c. “Ji Kore Tirotaar Aash/Taar Saday Sarbanash”—meaning “One who has expectations from wife, is doomed forever.”

- d. “Maak-e Sai Mukholoi/Tiri Sai Hatoloi”—meaning “The mother looks at the face (of the son), the wife looks at the hands (of the son for gifts). Here, the mother of the husband is socially given a privileged position over the “wife.”
- e. “Hak Nai Dhak Nai/Gabhoru Tirir Naak Nai”—meaning “A young wife who does not listen or isn’t under the veil is shameless.”
- f. “Masor Naniba Soru Kuta/Tirir Naniba Bajar Luta”—meaning “Never to buy the smallest fish; never to marry a woman frequenting the Bazaars.” Here, a woman frequenting the market places or bazaars are seen as character less.

6. Context 2: physical traits of wives

There are also some proverbs that provide us with a rich reflection on the female body and the social consequences of people’s sexual differences. In such proverbs, certain physical traits of a woman are often viewed as inauspicious as can be found in the following expressions that shamelessly state that such women are not fit for marriage.

- a. “Uthor Upore Gofor Sari/Sei Tiri Dekhonte Bari”—meaning “Woman who has moustache over her leaps is impotent from the very look.”
- b. “Jar gharat Motoamua Tiri/Sei ghar Jai Hotosiri”—meaning “The family with a wife as unruly as man, shall be bereft of prosperity.”
- c. “Sorumua Api Kutosthor Ghai/Maj Dangar Api Poiekor Mur Khai”—meaning “A short girl is the root of conspiracy; a big-headed girl is the husband’s worry.”
- d. “Bannir Buti/Tirir Suti”—meaning “Like the short broom, a short wife is of no use.”

7. Context 3: polygamy and the plight of women

Polygamy is prevalent in many cultures, and the Assamese society in the Barpeta district was no different. There was a time in Barpeta, when the very rich well-to-do men could wed several wives either to fulfill their desire for a male heir, or to relinquish their physical hunger, or to show their so-called physical potency. In the absence of any strong protest, such norms gradually gained validity in the society. Now, in such a case, a particular wife could not have tolerated the presence of the “Satini” or the co-wife. Often, the fear of losing the love of the husband made one wife very jealous or even sometimes possess certain dangerous intents. As she did not have the courage to stand against the husband, and as she will not be able to sustain herself if thrown out of the family by the husband, she would rather try to assert her own existence against the co-wife or other wives.

- a. “Oin Satinire Lare Sare/Boini Satinie Puri Mare”—meaning “Unlike the other co-wives, if one’s own sister is the co-wife, it burns deeply.”
- b. “Jala Dibar Thai Nai/Jala Die Satinir Bhai”—meaning “There is no end to sorrows, when the brother of the co-wife starts torturing.” (Here, the woman who is uttering the proverb is implicated.)

- c. “Satnir Jal, Gaa Nakare Bhal”—meaning “The trap laid by the co-wife does not cure the pain in the real wife.” (Here, the woman uttering the proverb is implicated.)

Similarly, when the wife of a person dies at the tender age, the husband in order to fulfill his desire, he can remarry. However, the irony is that an aged man would often try to marry a teenage girl and even the poor parents of such girls would never hesitate to marry their daughter to an aged man. Thus, the power of wealth is the only recourse for the aged man deciding to remarry, and the girl would become a puppet in the hands of both her poor parents and the rich would-be husband.

- d. “Takar Naam Moina/Taka Thankli Ana Jai Anandabarir Koina”—meaning “Money is everything, and money can buy a beautiful wife.”

8. Context 4: affairs of women

Often seen as illicit, the love affair between a man and a woman was too common in Assamese folk life. To satisfy their emotional needs, many tender girls wanted to break free or did not even bother to lose chastity as a way of rebelling against the societal norms or the shackles of the family. As different types of confinements affect their emotional being, the girls and women were forced to live lives with certain limitations. However, against this situation, a very common saying that is being used in Barpeta is:

- a. “Pora Maas Nosto Hoi Dhomdhomiya Juit/Api Nosto Hoi Lokor Gharat Sui”—meaning “Like the fish gets spoilt when burnt, the girl gets spoilt when she sleeps with others.”

Assam is a land of rivers and since ancient times, the banks of the rivers had been serving as the meeting place for the girls and daughters. Besides, in older times, people used to fulfill the need of water by fetching water either from the rivers or from the nearby ponds. However, the local girls took this as an opportunity to taste the sense of “freedom” against the confinements at home. They liked to take bath and swim in the rivers, make merry, and carry out clandestine affairs with their loved ones especially with their male partners. However, such type of freedom also persuaded the girls to commit “mistakes” as can be found in the following utterances which are quite common in the village areas of Barpeta.

- b. “Obhabotei Swabhab Nosto/Noir Ghatot Naari Nosto”—meaning “Habits get spoilt due to wants; Chastity of a woman gets spoilt in the river-bank.” (Here, river-banks are seen as clandestine meeting place of boys and girls.)
- c. “Purush Nosto Hatot/Mai Nosto Ghatots”—meaning “Man gets spoilt in the bazaars, Woman in the river-banks.”

Like the unmarried girls and daughters, many married women too maintained secret relationship with other men to satisfy their mental and sexual needs. In most cases, however, the woman’s character was in question rather than the impotence of the husbands or the other man who strived for her company.

d. “Mone Sine Pap/Mawe Sine Bap”—meaning “Only the heart knows when a sin is committed, only the mother knows the father of her child.” (Here, mother hood is not obviously celebrated.)

The derogatory remarks against the women with extramarital relationship are very obvious in the following lines:

e. “Oho Thogo Bai Rupe Tor Sama Nai/Iman Boyoxote Tinta Swami Pai Asa/Tor Somo Bhagyabati Nai”—meaning “Oh sister, there is none as beautiful as you, since you got three men as your husband at this age, there is none as lucky as you.”

9. Context 5: tripartite relationship among the mother, daughter, and daughter-in-law

In the Assamese society of Barpeta, the relationship between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is too intricate. As the new bride arrives in the house, the mother-in-law faces different sorts of anxieties and helplessness. She feels that the bride shall now have all the control over her son, and she will be deprived of her son's love. Therefore, she cannot take the attachment her son has for the newlywed girl for granted. She becomes even more jealous when all members in the family start giving preference to the new member in the family. However, the society is structured in such a way that despite enduring all mental pressures, the daughter-in-law has to follow the dictates of the mother-in-law, as she has to ensure the conjugal happiness of her son. Even the greater society also feels that the mother-in-law should carefully watch every move of her daughter-in-law. Thus, the mother becomes ill-reputed as the head strong woman of shrewd observation. The following are some utterances prevalent in Barpeta which:

a. “Patharor Kala, Behoror Tel/Sahek Noho Borekor, Bate Bate Mel”—meaning “A bride without a mother-in-law is the talk of the village.”

b. “Mase Chotka Anja/Sahui Chotka Bori”—meaning “The fish makes the curry tasty; the mother-in-law makes the bride perfect.”

But, such a control over the bride creates additional problems as the mother takes this opportunity to fulfill her angst against the bride causing an even more complex relationship between them.

c. “Edon Bora Sahur Lora Sora/Bowari Adhamora”—meaning “A bucket full rice and the hurried movements of the mother-in-law renders the daughter-in-law half dead.”

d. “Tini Saj Nakhai Borek Kope/Tio Sauheke Daulhe Dhore”—meaning “The daughter-in-law becomes too weak without meals for three times, yet the mother-in-law catches the foul for meal.”

Such treatment from the mother-in-law is sure to aggravate further hatred for the mother-in-law. Although the bride seems to respect her in-laws, she can never come to good terms with the mother-in-law. The following utterances imply the same feeling:

e. “Sahu, Satini, Nanad Khosa/Sahu Thakile Gharar Pora Gusa”—meaning “It’s better to stay away from home than to be tortured by the mother-in-law, co wife and sister-in-law.”

f. “Buri Moril Bhalei Hol/Sikhen Kathao Morei Hol.”—meaning “It is good that the old woman is no more, her clothes are now mine.”

However, it is important to note that such proverbs and sayings are also popular in other cultures. In English, there is a saying that “Happy is he who marries the son of a dead mother.” In German, it is said that the “Husband’s Mother is the Wife’s Devil.” In Spanish, there is a saying that “Give up all hopes of peace as long as your mother-in-law lives.” But there are also some sayings on the tripartite relationship among the mother, daughter, and daughter-in-law as is explicit from the following example in Barpeta District.

g. “Akha Tita Bakh Tita/Tita Nimur Pat Tato Kori Tita/Sahu Nanandir Mat”—meaning “There are several herbs including Neem which taste bitter, but the words of the mother-in-law and the sister-in-law taste more bitter.”

10. Context 6: general attitude toward women

The patriarchal ethos in the Assamese society is so dominant that in the fear of the women taking the advantage in the household, people often abstain from openly acknowledging the contribution of the women or even praising them as in case of the following:

a. “Bharjak Praangsiba Briddhkal Hole/Bhojanak Prahangsiba Khadya Jin Gole”—meaning “A wife should be admired only at the old age; a meal should be praised if it gets digested.”

b. “Jaar Stree Swatantraa, Si Jiyonte Mora”—meaning “One whose wife is independent, leads a life in death.”

c. “Kotari Dharaba Silot/Tiri Solaba Kilot”—meaning “A knife is to be sharpened on the stone; the wife to be controlled by beating.”

Even while the husband dies a premature death, the wife always faces verbal abuses of different sorts from the people in the locality including her own family members.

d. “Doh putra Jadi thake Tar Ghare/Swamihina Hole Narik Obhagini Bole”—meaning “A woman without husband is called unfortunate despite having a dozen sons.”

On the contrary, if the wife dies, the husband has the peculiar right to remarry. Therefore, in the Assamese society of Barpeta district, there are many cases where, even the middle-aged men are also never reluctant to marry or remarry. However, nobody comes forward to marry even a teen-aged widow as this is never acceptable in society.

e. “Subat Dur Gaman, Take Najaba Sari

Sowalir Namot Burhike Aniba/Teo Naniba Bari”—meaning “You may marry an elderly woman assuming her to be young, but never marry a widow.” (Here, ‘Bari; in Assamese means widow.)

Nothing can be as disgraceful a comment as this that discourages widow marriage in the Assamese society even today. Not even the widow, the possibility for remarriage is almost impossible even for those women who are divorced or abandoned by their husbands. If at all a woman is forced to leave the husband’s house, she loses everything including her social status. People often keep their evil eyes on such women. And if that woman is beautiful, then her beauty contributed to further troubles on her way as in case of the following utterance.

f. “Mota Naikia Nari/Dhum Dhum Koi Dhore Gari”—meaning “The woman without the husband catches the bus with pomposity.”

There are also some norms following which a widow cannot, most specifically in case of the Brahmin community, take meat or have meal in a social gathering together with the elderly people of the locality.

g. “Kopalot Ase Bidhoba Jog/Khabo Khoje Mangsor Bhoj”—meaning “Widowhood is her destiny, yet she thinks of feasting with meat.”

However, the educated people in society often fail to understand the fact the women also have the equal right to enjoy the same privileges as their male counterparts. However, the women without their husbands often face the greatest brunt from the society members as is implied through this following proverb.

h. “Akashot Chandra Nai, Nojoloi Tora/Ji Naarir Purush Nai, Jiwantate Mora”—meaning “Like the sky without the moon or stars, the woman without the husband is as good as dead even while living.”

11. Proverbial contexts and prejudices against women

The examples cited above are only some contextual examples where sexist language is abundantly used in the Assamese society. The use of specific languages and words in the common sayings and proverbs render an adverse effect on the mentality of the people further making the actual emancipation of the women really impossible. The same age-old narratives about women keep circulating from one generation to the other as can be seen through the different oral folk sayings and proverbial expressions of the people of Barpeta, in which women are denied their rightful status, self, and dignity. Even in the proverbs emanating from the mouths of the mythical “Daak” which are still in wide circulation in different corners of the district, mostly among the poor farming villages, women were sought to be kept under male control in terms of certain stereotypical images of women. As rightly stated by Goswami, “There is no other option left to find out the fault of the women than to utter one or two proverbs from Daak.” [8] (p. 88) Therefore, some reformists often state that “Tirir Uparat Sokolo Marad” meaning—“Every male in society behaves like a husband with a married woman.”

Thus, the linguistic treatment of the women in the Assamese society by the illiterate and educated together is part of the “Cultural Literacy” of the Assamese-speaking

people in the greater Barpeta area. As a term coined by Hirsch, “Cultural literacy” refers to the ability to understand and participate fluently in a given culture. The culturally literate person, according to Hirsch, is able to talk to and understand others of that culture with fluency, while the culturally illiterate person fails to understand culturally conditioned allusions, references to past events, idiomatic expressions, jokes, names, places, etc. Hirsch et al. [3] states:

Cultural literacy, unlike expert knowledge, is meant to be shared by everyone. It is that shifting body of information that our culture has found useful, and therefore worth preserving. Only a small fraction of what we read and hear gains a secure place on the memory shelves of the culturally literate, but the importance of this information is beyond question. This shared information is the foundation of our public discourse. It allows us to comprehend our daily newspapers and news reports, to understand our peers and leaders, and even to share our jokes. (p. x)

Schipper [4] stated that musical, direct, frank, and the proverbs reflect not only cultural uniqueness but also commonalities shared around the globe and throughout history. Consciously or subconsciously, we have all been influenced by such messages, in spite of local and regional differences, and historical developments and changes (p. 19). He also argues,

Proverbs about women substantially help to explain how and why, worldwide, sexual differences have resulted in a growing gap, a gap that has estranged men and women from sharing both public roles in life and responsibilities at home. Teaching and preaching the preservation of such a gendered gap, on the basis of relatively insignificant body differences, proverbs have reinforced prevailing hierarchies and established rigid images of what it means not to be a man but a woman, thus legitimating accessory roles for life for both sexes. The inescapable other side of this prescriptive coin is that women and men who do not fit the prescribed behavior are stigmatized—no less by other women than by men. Privileges are never given up easily. (pp. 20-21)

Thus, in case of Assam too, the proverbial expressions are affected by the “Cultural Literacy” of the people in question. However, the proverbs, maxims, and similar expressions can also reveal different ways of seeing or perceiving life. As part of people’s cultural legacies, most proverbs confirm the societal norms and values forcing the users to further insist on the collective acceptance of the male-inspired domestic and social interests and the inherited ideas about the Assamese womanhood. This also hints at how sexism is still dominant among the Assamese-speaking people of the Barpeta district. The proverbial utterances cited above display misogynistic sentiment which are transmitted from generation to generation. Some even argue that a reflection of the negative attitude toward women is associated with impurity and blind faith of the people as in both physical and mental harassments of the Assamese women, such proverbs have been very handy.

Some studies have already been conducted on Assamese folk life, folk literature, and proverbial utterances such as Prafulla Dutta Goswami’s *Osomiya Jana Sahitya* [8], Nabin Chandra Sarma’s *Osomiya Loko Sanskritir Abhash* [9], and Manisha Talukdar’s *Osomiya Prabhad Probrachan: Ek Bishleshanatmak Adhayan* [10] among others which are significant contributions to the field. However, none of them have so far specifically discussed the role of sexism in language as well as in folk like and culture. Books like *Prabad Prabasan (Buranji, Baichitra Aru Bishleshan)* by Chakreswar Das

[11] or *Loko Sahityar Rahghara: Fakara Jojana* by Phul Kumari Kalita [12] are also very rare contributions toward excavating Assamese proverbial expressions in lower Assam area but without a particular focus on the use of the sexist language and its problematics. Therefore, as we discuss equality and equity for everyone living in the society, there is also a need of studying the use of words and language with insights received from the newer researches being carried out in the fields such as Paremiography, Miemeology, Sociolinguistics, and Cultural literacy across different societies and cultures.

It is a matter of debate whether the cultural values of specific language communities are actually reflected in their proverbs. The point here is that even in the twenty first century, the proverbs still remain very popular among the common masses despite unprecedented developments in science and technology. Several scholars including Mieder [13] have reacted to the male dominance and the misogyny in proverbs. As a surprise, they tried to find the “man” in place of “woman” as early as 1880 in a short humorous verse: “Early to bed and early to rise Makes *woman* healthy, wealthy, and wise” (p. 179). Another gender-free possibility would be to replace “man” with “person,” as in case of “Early to bed, early to rise, makes a person healthy, wealthy, and wise” (p. 179). We now should see the Assamese “women” as individuals who always have “fewer opportunities” than men in accessing the existing occupations and positions. It therefore rests upon an assumption that “gender equality” means integrating these women into the social and political status quo. Thanks to the idea of women’s liberation through education and economic uplift that there are now noticeable reactions against such sexual politics.

12. Conclusion

Today, girls and women of our society are provided with a full range of choices and preferences for meeting their daily needs and fulfilling their interests and experiences. However, contrary to this, linguistic sexism has become a social phenomenon encouraging more gender discriminations by means of language. The Assamese proverbial expressions used in the Barpeta district are part of the “Cultural Literacy” of the people of the region, but even the educated women are so reluctant to accept the fact that a particular kind of “Cultural Literacy” is also dangerous to the society they live in as women themselves turn out to be the oppressors of other women. The sexist terminologies prevalent among the Assamese-speaking people of the Barpeta district are so inherently lasting and can be so purposively customized to satisfy male hypocrisy or female “jealousy” that it will need ages to get rid of them unless we do not stop promoting gender inequality in society through both colloquial and standard languages. The discussions provided in the paper would surely enable the readers to examine the attitude of the Assamese people toward women and how linguistic and social stereotypes are born due to continuous linguistic transactions in a sexist society. Finally, answers to questions like—what the Assamese proverbs say about the women or why the Assamese people believe that men and women are to be treated differently should source new researches on the politics of language in general. In the context of the twenty first century, such researches will encourage more and more region specific, transregional, and transnational researches around the living conditions of women in society and how language has been continuously being used as a tool to dominate women.

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