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REPRESENTING THE FEMALE BODY AND THE CON-  
CEPT OF FEMININE BEAUTY IN THE CONTEXT OF AS-  
SAMESE PROVERBS

**Abstract:** Female body has always been considered to be the symbol of grace, modesty, simplicity and submissiveness. This stereotype is strengthened in oral literature. Proverbs constitute one of the most important components of oral literature. Beauty is universally considered the main criterion of women. However, every society has its own notion of beauty regarding women. There are certain stereotypical expectations of female body in every society. But the standards of beauty differ from people to people, society to society. If a woman does not fulfill these norms of the society that she belongs to, she is not regarded as a perfect woman. Women, who are outside the prevailing norms of beauty, are considered to be abnormal, witch, evil-like, disobedient, cruel etc. Therefore, notions regarding female body are socially constructed. Such, and many other related norms of feminine beauty and the female body are found in women related Assamese proverbs. The present paper tries to analyze the construction of ideas regarding womanhood with special reference to female body and feminine beauty through Assamese proverbs. It is an ethnographic study of the Nagaon district of middle Assam in India.

**Keywords:** Assam, gender stereotypes, female beauty, female body, India, male gaze, misogyny, patriarchy, proverbs, somatism, stereotypes, women, worldview

**Introduction**

[...]

when I was growing up, my sisters

with fair skin got praised

for their beauty, and in the dark

I fell further, crushed between high walls.

(Wong quoted in Kesselman, et al. 1995: 97)

Beauty may be a state of mind but all through the ages every society has laid its priority on beauty as the chief criterion in the assessment of womanhood. Women in most societies adorn their bodies to look beautiful. There are certain stereotypical expectations of the female body in society. As Naomi Wolf points out:

'The beauty myth', has a powerful effect on all women. It consists of the belief that women must possess an immutable quality called 'beauty' in order to be successful and attractive to men. Our culture is permeated by the conviction that beauty is the central measure of women's worth. (quoted in Kesselman, et al. 1995: 92)

But the standards of beauty differ from people to people, society to society. What is deemed beautiful by one society may not be considered so by another. The concept of beauty is also seen to vary from time to time. Among the Chinese, women having long feet were derogatorily treated and in the past there were practices of shortening the feet for beautification (Schipper 2003: 50). However, this tradition may not always be in vogue among the people of other societies. Every society has its own norms regarding the concept of beauty and if a woman does not fulfil those norms of the society she belongs to, she is not regarded as a perfect woman. Women who remain outside the prevailing norms of beauty are considered abnormal, evil, disobedient and cruel. Therefore, the notions regarding the female body are nothing but social constructs. People, after interacting with one another from one generation to another, acquire some concepts in their minds and behave accordingly. Gradually those concepts become naturalized into certain roles and with the passing of time those roles gain recognition from the society, which are, in fact, not real. It is common to represent any socially constructed concept in various literary forms. Notions regarding the female body, as stated above, are nothing but a kind of social construct.

#### ***A Brief Account of Assam and Assamese Paremiography***

Assam is one of the states of India which is situated in the north-eastern part of the country. It has 27 districts. It was earlier known as *Kāmarupa* and *Prāgjyotiṣpura*. The name *Assam* literally means incomparable. Assamese is the most widely spoken language in this area. But this land consists of several ethnic

groups with their own languages and cultures. Assam is rich in folklore like all other societies, and as an important genre of folklore, proverbs are in abundance in this region.

The proverb represents one of the most important and popular genres of folk literature. According to Wolfgang Mieder:

Proverbs contain everyday experiences and common observations in succinct and formulaic language, making them easy to remember and ready to be used instantly as effective rhetoric in oral or written communication. (2004: xi)

The term proverb falls under the analytical category; in almost every language there are several terms which are used to mean proverb and these terms fall under the ethnic genres of folklore, e.g., in the Assamese language there are terms like *Prabacan*, *Prabād/Pravād*, *Paṭantar*, *dr̥ṣṭānta*, *bacan* etc. which can be called the ethnic genres of the proverb. Paremiographical publications in Assamese have already been done by several persons and P.R.T. Gordon compiled the book *Some Assamese Proverbs* (1896) which stands out as a milestone of such studies in Assamese. There are several other folklorists who have also done a lot of paremiographical work in Assamese. Significant among them being Gopal Ch. Das's *Asamīyā Paṭantarmālā* (1900), Prafulla Chandra Barua's *Assamese Proverbs* (1929), Sarbeswar Rajguru's *Asamīyā Prabād* (1972), Dandiram Datta's *Sānthar*, *Phakarā-Jojanā*, etc.

#### ***Representation of the Female Body and Feminine Beauty in Assamese Proverbs***

Representation of the female body is an important area of research for the feminist scholars. Human biology is a significant key to understand human behaviour as proverbs referring to the female body illustrate. The female body is the subject of numerous assumptions and projections in oral traditions regarding what is good, bad, desirable, repugnant from hair to toes; the female body and feminine beauty are commented upon. Representation of female body is one of the most common features of Assamese proverbs. Ideological conception regarding the construction of female bodies can be seen in many Assamese proverbs. The pre-

sent study discusses a few proverbs in Assamese where the female body and feminine beauty are represented.

In Assamese society, a woman with puffed cheeks, for instance, is considered to be ugly. An example is here excerpted from the *Dākar Bacan* (Sayings of *Dāk*), a sub-genre of proverb:

*Nājāni daivar gati*

*Ophondā gālio hai pārvati.*

(Woman with puffed cheeks is generally considered unlucky but if fortune favours, she might turn out to be the lucky one.)

It is important to study how beauty is constructed in a particular society. The term ‘*ophandā*’ has a derogatory connotation in Assamese, e.g., *ophandi gangātop howā* (to be puffed up with vanity), *ophondā bhem* (great vanity). So a woman, having such cheeks, is considered to be arrogant, haughty or proud and is not liked by others. In spite of her ugliness she may attain success with the help of luck.

Almost every literary genre of a language is used as the medium of representation of the female body. Assamese literature is no exception. The female body is represented in both oral and written literatures in Assamese. *Burhi Air Sādhu*, the famous collection of Assamese folktales, is one of the most important examples of such medium of representation like the tales of *Tejimala*, *Ou- Kuwari* (The *Ou* Princess), *Cilanir Jiyekar Sadhu* (The Tale of the Kite’s Daughter). In the marriage songs of Assam, the stereotypical notions of the female body are described. Moreover, some Assamese terminologies can be seen as the representative medium of the female body and its association with female beauty e.g., *Kaṅkāl khāmuciā cowāli* (girl with slim waist), *Māgur baraniā cowāli* (girl with the colour of *Māgur* fish [*Magur* is a type of fish which is more popular in eastern India. It is generally dark olive colour. The scientific name of this fish is *Clarias batrachus*]), *Bhomorā kaliā culi* (hair as black as bumble-bees) *Dālim gutiā Dānt* (teeth like the seed of the pomegranate).

It is interesting to observe that the gendered notion of Assamese proverbs is not free from stereotypical norms. Such stereotypical representations of the female body will be mentioned in the following discussion.

*Oñthar opare gophar s̄ari*  
*Nitchai sito bidhavā n̄ari.*

Variation,

*Oñthar opare gopher s̄ari*  
*Sei tiri dekhante b̄ari.*

(A woman who sports a moustache will definitely attain widowhood.)

The moustached woman is doubly cursed because like all women she is categorized as the 'other' but along with it she is also considered to be an 'error'. Being a deviation from the normative model of female structure, she is flawed. She is neither a "normal" male nor female. The moustache of a woman upsets the clean binary division between men and women. Just as effeminacy in man is highly undesirable, any sign of masculinity is even more unwelcome. One can see the focus on the importance for a woman to look good and any woman who looks like a man or vice-versa is an anomaly.

Consider, for instance, another proverb which goes like this:

*Jār gharat matamuwā tiri*  
*Tār gharat n̄ai ciri.*

(Houses consisting of women having masculine appearance have no prosperity.)

Women lacking such stereotypical features are alienated from the society. Though the transformation from female to feminine is constructed, yet it is considered to be a natural process and for that very reason people accept these feminine qualities of a woman as 'real'.

While talking about representation or rather social representation we should be very much clear about the term. Social representations are the social constructs which are ideologically structured in the society. Every social being acquires such constructs not in a conscious way but it can be possible with the help of the day-to-day practices. People become so much involved in all those representational activities that those activities seem to be natural but not constructed. Such institutes can help in constructing the ideological mind set of the people in a society irrespective of their gender. Gradually they adopt all those social

constructs through that process of socialization. Any study that denotes representation has a relation with the concept of a value system that prevails among the people of one society e.g.,

*Kutkurā culi khajatir guri.*

(Women having curly hair are supposed to be quarrelsome by nature.)

A woman possessing curly hair is not quarrelsome but it is the stereotypical norm that people have in their mind while creating any ideological concept. Such woman is represented as quarrelsome through the medium of the proverb. The concept of representation can be seen in every aspect of society and its culture. The representation of the curly hair in case of the females can help us in understanding the stereotypical model of the patriarchal society that women should maintain their hair in a very systematic manner. It may refer to other aspects of the social structure. It is known to all that the domestic duties including cooking are supposed to be done by women. While preparing food it is the duty of the cook to be conscious of cleanliness and hygiene. Earlier, among the Assamese people, women maintained long hair. Since they had long hair, they had to maintain themselves in a disciplined way so that the food was not spoilt. Wastage of food in this way creates a host of other problems. This proverb provides us with a clue to our understanding of many issues related to women. Firstly, the interior of the house is always meant for women; secondly, quarrelsome women are discarded from the society; thirdly, women having curly hair are not desirable.

In any form of literature, one object is acted upon or substituted by another object which is real and there is a difference between the real one and the represented one. Thus, there is always a relationship between the thing which is represented and the person before whom it is represented, and here the concept of ideology plays an important role. The ideological concept regarding a particular object is more important than the innate quality that the object carries and it is important to understand that ideological concept because according to Ferdinand de Saussure, there is no intrinsic relationship between the signifier and the signified; it is only based on arbitrariness (Hartley 16). It is the concept of ideology of a person that makes it meaningful. In other words, ideology can be called the bridge between the

object or person that is represented and the person for whom that representation is constructed, e.g.,

*Topanir neocan ratipuā*

*Tirir neocan sarumuwā.*

(It is good to get rid of sleeping in the morning as it is not good for health; likewise, a woman with a small face should be discarded as she is considered to be quarrelsome.)

In Assamese society people may have an ideology about women's appearance. Being governed by such ideology, there is a prevailing notion that women's appearance should be distinct. If someone deviates from those norms, she will be categorised as a non-woman in day-to-day practices as well as in literature where they are found in the represented form.

The object of representation is always incomplete without the context. The object or person which is represented for another object or person can be understood only in the presence of a certain context. In semiotics, any object or person can be called a sign which has meaning in the presence of a particular context, for example:

*Cowāli nānibā nāgini cakuwā mukhat micikiā hāñhi.*

Two interpretations regarding this saying were encountered during field work and the difference particularly centered around one word, *nāgini*. It connotes two meanings – firstly, a female snake and secondly, a Naga woman, member of an ethnic community of Assam as well as of North-East India. The first meaning goes like this – girls having snake-like eyes and a smiling face are not suitable for marriage. To appreciate this one must have some knowledge about what the 'snake' stands for as a symbol. In Assamese society, the snake is often represented as a silent killer or revengeful, and many proverbs have references to such qualities of this reptile. For example:

*Sāp māri negurat bis thowā.*

(Contextual meaning: Vanquish a foe after having brought him under control.)

Here the snake is used to symbolize a foe.

*Sāpe kaṅkālar kob nāpāhare.*

(Contextual meaning: The defeated will always harbour feelings of revenge towards his malefactor.)

A proper understanding of a proverb therefore demands knowledge of the motifs and symbols regularly used in literature. It is not possible to separate a representational sign from the context because that sign can only be understood in the presence of other signs that are related to it. The whole process of representation is a system which may be called the ‘codes’ as in the words of W.J.T. Mitchel:

[...] codes refer to a body of rules for combining and deciphering representation signs. When something stands for something to somebody, it does so by virtue of a kind of social agreement – ‘let us agree that this will stand for that’ – which once understood, need not be restated on every occasion. (1995: 24)

The second interpretation of the saying *Cowāli nānibā nāgini cakuwā mukhat micikiā hāṅhi* is that girls having eyes like the Naga women and a smiling face should be discarded. During the field visit for this present study, it was found that earlier in Assamese society it was believed that the people of the Naga community, especially the women, should not be taken in good faith. They were believed to be cheats who exploited people with their beauty and so this proverb is a kind of warning against the people of such a society. From this proverb we can understand how ethnicity is constructed and represented in the society and to understand this, one has to take the help of several literary texts, whether oral or written, into account.

Language not only refers to the voiced forms, it refers to any kind of communication where the eyes play an important role, too. The eyes are considered to be one of the main expressive media of communication. With the help of eyes we can acquire knowledge regarding the whole world. Along with the physical world that we live in, the people that we meet can be inserted into our body and mind through the eyes. It is the eyes which have impact on our mind. The eyes can be called the way through which we can study the mind or the heart of a person. An Assamese proverb describing women’s eyes goes like this:



*Cowāli nānibā bijuli cakuwā mukhat mickiā hāñhi.*

Or,

*Cowāli leterā bijuli cakuwā māre micikiā hāñhi.*

(Meaning: Girls, having eyes like lightning, should be shunned or regarded as foul beings.)

Proverbs of similar types in other languages can also be cited here:

*A house without curtains is like a woman without eyebrows.* (Romanian proverb)

*Beautiful eyes, villainous heart.*

(Creole, Guadeloupe) (Schipper 2003: 29)

For an understanding of the concept of ideology, we can cite an example here from the *Dākar Bacan* (Sayings of the *Dak*), a sub-genre of the proverb:

*Kutkurā culi meli phurai*

*Dāke bule tāi giri nāsai.*

(Meaning: A woman having curly hair is considered to be the destroyer of the family.)

The relation between woman with curly hair and destroyer of a family is nothing but arbitrary. It is the ideological set-up which bridges these two things. So ideology is a set of some fixed rules which cannot be disobeyed and people accept the ideas that have been carried by the ruling class as the ideas given by the whole society. The most important thing is that this set of ideas is accepted as the natural process of the society by each of its members. Women accept these ideas as natural. The concept of ideology helps in naturalising the state of things in society and the people's psyche is ready to accept what is prevalent in society. Women become the object of commodity and they are judged within the framework of the male gaze. For instance,

*Āhu cābā gadhuli, Sāli cābā puwā,*

*Khōj kārhote cowāli cābā, kon kenekowā.*

(Meaning: The *Āhu* rice is pleasant to be seen in the evening, the *Sāli* rice is pleasant in the morning; likewise a girl is pleasant to be seen or judged by her gait.)

The male gaze seems to objectify women as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ and women feel a kind of alienation from what they really are.

Most of the time, it is believed that women get beautifully dressed only because of their lovers or husbands. As in an Assamese historical ballad ‘Barphukanar Git’, when the Barphukan or Viceroy of Guwahati has to flee suddenly in order to escape the wrath of the Prime Minister of the land, and his wife expresses her sorrow vividly. In the words of Praphulladatta Goswami:

*I no longer put on my bangles...  
I shall pull off my gold necklace...* (1982: 21).

Therefore, women are supposed to be projected through the male gaze and become the object of commodity. According to Patricia Uberoi, “Women have become objects or things to be appropriated, possessed and exchanged in the social relations of cooperation and competition among men” (2007: WS41).

In any communicative genre, women are portrayed as the objects or commodities and represented as the objects of male desire. They become the sex symbols of the society. From earlier times the devaluation of women as sex objects and commodities has been done with the help of various representative genres. By commodifying women, such communicative genres limit the role and position of women in society. For instance:

*Keṅcā bacā rihāre balāba pāro mai, kutkurā culi dekhi  
bhāge.*

(Meaning: If a woman has curly hair, she will be rejected by society in spite of her abilities in other household chores.)

By abusing woman, society wants to show that if she lacks the normative criteria or if there is any deviation from the particular normative criteria, she should be regarded as disobedient. Her beauty depends on the male gaze, i.e., how the male members of the society wish to see her. The desires of the male members to observe the female members initiate all kinds of representation

and construction of womanhood in a society. In the words of Leela Dube:

Considerable importance is attached to the way a girl carries herself, the way she sits, stands and talks and interacts with others. A girl should walk with soft steps: so soft that they are barely audible to others. Taking long strides denotes masculinity...A girl has to be careful about her postures...To establish her feminine identity; a young girl should avoid masculine demeanour and behavior. (2008: WS16)

An Assamese proverb can be cited in this context:

*Akāji tirotār tinitā gun, khojar terā-bekā, mātar henāhucā, bhātar domādom.*

(Meaning: An unskilled woman has three features—winding gait, indistinct speech and a ravenous appetite.)

To conclude, proverbs are commonly considered to be the creation of the masses and what is created by a group of people is usually full of common sense. It is important to know that the commonsensical knowledge is often constructed by the powerful section of society. Proverbs or any other literary genres can be used as the tool for establishing such knowledge. Women, who deviate from the stereotypical model of a society, are unfortunately regarded as the 'other' and such deviated women are then represented in literature, whether written or folk, as anomaly. Therefore, the female body and the feminine beauty are clear examples of constructing stereotypes in society. Regrettably, some proverbs become weapons used for disseminating such stereotypes.

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