CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION
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This study is based on secondary sources as well as field works in the districts of Kamrup (Rural and Metro) and Goalpara and was carried out over a period of four years. The fields study gave me the opportunity to collect some new tales along with some new versions of the already existing tales, not recorded in print so far. Moreover it also allowed me to experience the life style of the society particularly, the day to day life of the women of these two communities.

This thesis is an attempt to understand representation of women in the tribal societies of Assam; however it is not possible to work among all the tribes. Therefore, two tribes, namely, The Garos and the Rabhas, living in Southern part of Assam were selected. The reason of selection is that they are neighbouring tribes and one tribe is matrilineal and the other adheres to patriarchal set up. Moreover they have linguistic affinity.

The aim of the study is to find how women in the tribes like Rabhas and Garos are represented through a content analysis of their own folktales. Folk literature gives better projection of the social and cultural life of a community. Role played by women in these two cultures is discussed, thereby the exploration of the society, where women form an integral part and how women are represented in the tales which are a reflection of the society. The songs and tales are transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition, which is mainly preserved by women folk of any society. Women sing folk-songs and narrate folktales in the domestic sphere as well as in social gathering.

In this endeavour an attempt has been made to study folktales in the context of tribal societies (two) of Assam. A study has been completed by exploring data from districts of Assam, namely Kamrup (Rural & Metro) and Goalpara. The data has been collected from field work which facilitated use of observation and informal interview in different villages and meetings of people.
and also from the already printed collection of folktales of more than one version and collections). Folkloristic analysis of tales depicting women is followed. While doing the content analysis of tales I have used perspectives propounded by famous folklorists like A.K Ramanujan who worked on folktales, Zack Zipes, Torbong Lundell, Aarne and Thompson, P.D. Goswami, J.L. Fisher and some others. Feminist thinkers of different schools as for instance Bell Hooks, Gilbert and Gubar, Irigaray and some others’ views and observations are also used in interpretation along with psychological approach as propounded by Sudhir Kakar. (Chapter I). Kirin Narayan’s views and observations are also used from time to time who worked on Kangra Folktales in the Northern part of India.

Chapter II, deals with gender concepts and theories that have evolved in the study of folklore since 70’s onwards. Review was done to see how gender has emerged as a relevant category in the folk narrative since 1970s. Folk narratives after all are “Sites of competing, historically and socially framed desires... (they)... continue to play a privileged function in the reproduction of various social construct including gender and narrative” (Bacchilega, 1993:11). Mention needs to be made of the observation of Margaret Mead; an anthropologist who pointed out in one of her studies that human behaviour is conditioned by the demand of the situation in which one is placed irrespective of male and female. Patriarchal social set up is responsible for assigning submissive role for women and dominant role for men in our society. Thus it is noticed that socialization as a continuous process helps to learn the normative behaviour expected from women and thus women are conditioned to accept the subordinate position. As a result of this the discrimination which was done against women by the society is sustained by women themselves.

It was observed that public discourse on gender is recognized both through formal teaching and informal messages from folk stories, folk songs, riddles and proverbs, conversation with friends. Chapter proceeds to have an understanding of folktales in general, stressing on how and when it is introduced in the print, characteristics and special features of folktales are discussed. Referring Max Lüthi form and nature of folktales are also discussed. It is also noticed that like other disciplines, the study of folk narrative is influenced by the
gendered views of its theoreticians to the extent that the very tool of folk
narrative research like the Aarne-Thompson tale type and motif listings are
subjects to gender bias, as many researchers have established. (Chapter II)

This chapter deals with the ethnographic account of the two tribes under
study—the Rabhas and Garos. The ethnic identity, history of the migration to their
present settlement area, geographical distribution, life-style and livelihood
pattern, dwelling, their social life, tradition and custom, rituals and festivals,
status of women, their position in the societies of Garos and Rabhas are also
being studied. When we take into account different opinion of scholars regarding
origin of the tribes we find that many scholars have acknowledged similarities
between the Rabhas and the Garos. Dalton holds that the Rabha customs, with the
exception of the laws of inheritance and marriage, resemble those of the Garos or
those of the Panikoches” (Dalton, 1872, p.87). Allen is of the opinion that “the
Rabhas are a section of the Bodo race and appears to be an offshoot of the Garos”
(Allen, 1905, p.49). Legends and tales also support this contention. Moreover
Rabhas were originally matrilineal like the Garos although they shifted to
patriarchal set up later on with the passage of time. But till now children take the
mother’s barai/surname following the matrilineal trait that persists with them.
(Chapter III)

Relation between daughter of God, celestial bride, or otherworld bride
and ordinary man is seen as natural in the folktales of both the tribes, a fact
already been asserted by Max Lüthi. Lüthi also observed that folktale heroes meet
and marry otherworld bride, come back, live and adjust with their normal life. In
both the Rabha and the Garo tales we see hero getting married with mermaid
Queen, celestial bride, daughter of God etc. Presence of celestial bride, mermaid
queen in folktales reflects on the exalted position of women in folktales.

Another interesting observation is that in the Rabha tales the heavenly or
celestial or otherworld bride comes down to earth to live with her ordinary
husband, adjusting herself with the surrounding, doing the household chores like
any other ordinary bride. Contrary to that in the Garo tales the hero goes out and
stays in the wife’s place following the Garo traditional system of marriage. Being
a matrilineal tribe, the woman does not leave her parental home after marriage. It is the husband who moves in with her in her parental home which she inherits.

Stereotyped presentation of women abounds in these folktales which have been studied. We get chaste but passive and dependent women. Evil stepmothers are never absent in the tales. Chaste women are found to be powerful in the sense that they are the life-givers of their husbands. A lot of value is attached to women’s chastity, honesty and loyalty. But her power is limited. She is powerful to the extent that to fight with the external world or with a formidable enemy she needs the assistance and active help from either some other human being or from animals like dogs or birds.

Another interesting thing that is observed is that women are actually powerful only when they possess magical or special power or they possess power aligned to monstrosity. As a result they are seen as evil witches or enchantresses. Society forms a negative opinion of them who dares to defy and revolt. Independent women are not accepted by the male dominant society.

Girls are given in marriage to python, cobra or frog. What is interesting is that in the Rabha tales the girls obeyed their fathers without any question and married their animal husbands. In both the Rabha tales, the daughter was given in marriage to a cobra in one, and to a frog in the other to keep their respective father’s promise given to the groom. But the daughter in the Garo tale forces her parents to give in to her demand of marrying a python (although she only knew that there was a handsome man under the python’s skin, a fact which she did not share with anybody till the end of the tale). This might suggest that in the matrilineal set up woman are more active and in a better position to fulfill her wishes or desire. Although both the Garo and the Rabha tales are similar, there is noticeable difference in the role played by the daughter-bride. In the Rabha tale, the daughter was passive, submissive and obliging much to the liking of the male dominated society, fulfilling patriarchal norms whereas in the Garo tale the daughter is active and assertive.
Though few in number, presence of intelligent, active and assertive women are also noticed. But it is worth mentioning here that the level of intelligence as reflected in women in folktales is of simple nature, not of highest order. In order to fulfill their desire some even acted boldly, and got wicked at times (Kancharaju Tikkaraju). But once she transgresses her traditional role and becomes a sort of rebel, society does not accept her with an open mind.

Witches and evil characters are all female and we find witches in some Rabha folktales. This is again might be a reflection of the society’s perspective on women. We still find practice of witch craft and incidents of witch hunting among Rabhas in real life. But we don’t encounter witches in Garo tales we have studied.

Jack Zipes said “magic of the tales can be equated to the wish – fulfillment and utopian projections of the people” (1979: 5-6). This we can see in the tales like Tore-Tofre where the sisters turned themselves to ghillas in order to get close to the men of this choice and in Tasrairajur kahini also evil Kancharaju Tikkaraju took the guise of the bride Tasrairaju through magic in order to marry the man she desired (Basundhar).

Another noticeable point is that where women dominate, powerful husbands are either absent or simple and henpecked and have a secondary existence in those tales. Where women are portrayed as strong in the plot of the tale, husbands are almost non-existent.

Childlessness and unhappiness related with it forms a theme in a lot of tales. Tales reflect the issue of lack of children in the life of married couple as a major cause of concern and pain. In our society children plays an important part in a married couple’s life. This fact is also a reflection of the society at large. Childlessness is regretted but preference for the male child is not observed in the tales of both the tribes.

The tales do reflect on the two societies i.e. the Rabhas and Garos and comments on the pattern they follow in their societal existence. If we take into account the thematic heading under which the tales of the two tribes are classified, we find that there are commonalities and differences among women as...
represented in the folktales under study. In Garo folktales we find many instances where women ventures out and go beyond their stipulated gender roles. This is absent in Rabha tales which reflects on the fact that women in matrilineal societies enjoy better standing compared to their patriarchal counterparts. Women in some of the Garo tales are found to be better placed, having a say in their future, choosing their husband, following their wish or venturing out to fulfill their dream whereas women in the Rabha tales are within the confines of patriarchal regulations appearing more like passive victims. Thus those few who try to cross the mental barrier are seen as transgressors and society does not hold a high opinion on them. The fact that women in matrilineal Garo society enjoy a better social standing is also asserted by the fact that in Garo folktales we do not find women as passive victims and witches which abounds in the Rabha folktales. Another important thing observed is that women are not given in marriage as prize or gift in Garo tales as we found in Rabha folktales, a fact which hints at comparatively better status of women in Garo society than others including the Rabhas.

But women in their normative roles are common to tales from both the tribes. Irrespective of whether they conform to patriarchal or matrilineal social structure, women in both the Rabha and Garo tales are found to be living through assigned roles given to them based on the normative behaviour. Thus in the folktales of both the tribes we find qualities like chastity, loyalty, obedience, patience, tolerance, passivity, submissiveness, purity, kindness are highly appreciated and desired in women while negative qualities like greediness, jealousy, foolishness, rivalry, falsity are also associated with them. Most importantly women and their qualities are tested in her household management. There is no doubt that in the folktales of the Garos women enjoy relative autonomy regarding their choice of life and life partner compared to women in Rabha folktales. But women are physically abused in some Garo tales to retain male supremacy which goes against the popular belief that women are better off in matrilineal set up. (Chapter IV & V)

To sum up then there are commonalities and differences among women as represented in the folktales of both the tribes. It is difficult to answer the question
whether women have better status among matrilineal Garos in comparison to the Rabhas who adhere to patriarchal social structure with a clear ‘yes’ or ‘no’. It is found that elements of patriarchy are very much visible within matriliney, while elements of matriliney cannot be ruled out even from patriarchal societies. Although today’s society is changing fast, and the gap between the men and women are receding, still somewhere a mental barrier does exist which compels women to accept second fiddle. This might be because of the traditional upbringing and the set of gender roles that is constructed at the family and societal level. There is no escaping from the pressure and expectation which is gendered and the influence of patriarchy that is deep rooted in us.