Chapter- 6

Function of Folktales in Providing Data for Gender Studies

Women need mirrors that show them as the complex, distinctive, three-dimensional individuals they are. To find those mirrors, women must shatter the silvered glass of entrenched gender imagery and create their own individual self-imagery. They must break the silence: they must tune out the cultural racket: they must speak their own lives.

*Diana Tietjens Meyers, 2002*

6.1. Introduction:

Today Gender Studies has gained tremendous importance in academic disciplines. Scholars are trying to define the gender construction in society from diverse angles. Gender and Gendering are two socially acknowledged categories. As a term gender denotes the values and meanings ascribed socially to the female and male body. Gender is thus a socially assigned characteristic of men and women. It is not to be confused with sex. While sex is biology-based division, gender is socially framed discrimination. To the feminist critics, gender is an ideology because it naturalizes the role/performance allocated by the society. As a social category, it provides pre defined or pre ordained and unalterable spheres of activity to the male and female sections of the society. Thus gender studies is not women studies though women studies paved the path for gender studies and underlined some of the key concepts of gender studies. The feminist attempted to challenge the socio-cultural attribution and determination of gender values and roles as almost entirely as an imposition of male dominated society that produce fundamental differences in world view of women and men, girls and boys. The post modern view of gender, however, argue the fact that gender is not a fixed or stable role performed according to the social set up, but is also open to contest, reject and negotiations. So a change from different perspective is urged upon by today’s feminist studies. In this context the statement by Diana Tietjens Meyers is worth quoting.
Until feminist counter figurations supplant patriarchal figurations of womanhood, women’s social and economic gains will remain in jeopardy, for patriarchal figurations stoke misogyny and fuel antifeminist backlash. A culture–jamming, discursive politics must go hand in hand with feminist social and economic initiatives. (Meyers, 2002, 29)

**6.2. Gender in the Folk Narratives:**

Although gender has not entered the study of folk narratives at the very beginning, critical attention to the question of gender inequality received a focus in 1980s and 1990s. The 1998 Budapest Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research addressed certain questions of folk narrative and cultural identity. In the following year, ‘the Societe Internationale d’ Ethnographie et de Folklore meeting in Berge’ discussed many gender related issues, as did the 1992 International Society for Folk Narrative Research Meeting in Innsbruck and the 1993 Nordic Folklore Symposium in Seattle. All these seminars concentrated on the then virgin topic of gender disparity in the context of folk narrative and worldview. As a consequence several independent projects about folk narrative incorporated the ‘gender’ as prime concern– gender studies in the ‘Finnish Folklore Fellows Summer School’; Aili Nenola’s Finnish Research Project, ‘Culture, Tradition and the Gender System’ provoked a gender oriented approach to the folk narratives and the XIth Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) under the auspices of The Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysore, January, 1995 was devoted to the folklore and gender where a number of papers discussing the topic of gender from various angles in the context of folklore were presented. During this time the attention was shifted to the discussion of the inter relationship between gender and the folk narratives. Initiatives were taken to expose the patriarchal dominance behind the folk narratives in maintaining the stereotype of women’s image in the society. Strong arguments were offered in favour of rejecting the subservient status of women as depicted in the folktales and other genres. The folktales were used as a tool for spreading the message of gender equality by bringing to light certain sensitive points about gender roles in traditional society. (Handoo, et al 1999, 3-4)

This chapter embarks on a listening or reading of such folktales in search of a trend in gender reflections in Assamese folktales.

**6.3. Gender in the Assamese Folktales:**

In the Assamese critical scenario, the urge for using folk tales to underscore the cultural history of gender has just begun. Such a radical approach is both relevant and rewarding in
understanding the interaction between gender concern and socio-cultural reality of the community. They are consequently expressive of the worldview of the society at some point in time; they convey indicators of the prevailing ideology on which our culture is founded. Hierarchies of superiority and inferiority in terms of class, caste, race, age and gender get reflected in the tales and transmitted to the next generation through these tales. They are suitable sources for an inquiry into justification of the subtle and persistent construct of power and dominance in the gender relations especially when folktales about women are considered. Thus folktales may serve as an agenda to search for the society’s notion of gender and to initiate a debate on the issues of gender discrimination that is prevalent in the social systems and cultural practices of the Assamese society. Pauline Greenhill remarks,

Women are subject of a great many traditional and popular ideas, beliefs and practices. Folklore contributes greatly to the process of turning biologically sexed beings into symbolically and culturally gendered ones—both female and male—hence, much folklore about women serves to create, recreate and reinforce ideas about the differences between men and women. (Pauline, 2009, xxxv)

The roles assigned to them and the dominant values and ideologies, moral and internalized oppression are unconsciously accepted as ‘natural’ and ‘just’ in the folk narratives. The gender disparity, thus, has been saturated with the societal worldview, which was taken for granted by the ancestors. No articulated voice against the culturally structured images of women have been discernible in the tales of Assam. In light of this cultural mindset one can conceive of the moral ethics of womenfolk that hinders them to reimagining and refiguring their social relations. Thus a care ethics theory can be developed from the traditional Assamese tales that can direct the notion of gender studies on a positive line.

In the context of Assamese culture, it is observed that the gender roles in the society are generated by the patriarchal ideology. The traditional folktales bear the clear stamps of this concept. For the analysis of the gender concerns in the Assamese folktales samples have been selected from the folktale collections compiled by Lakhminath Bezbaroa, (Burhi Air Sadhu,, Journal Emporium, 2010; Kakadeuta aru Natilora, Kitap Samalaya, 2004) Dr. P. D. Goswami (Ballads and Tales of Assam, 1970, Tales of Assam, 1980), J. Barooah, (Folktales of Assam, 1963), Dr. Jagadish Patgiri (ed.) (Asam Anchalar Janajatiya Sadhukatha: Upadan aru Adhyayan, 2005) and Beck, Brenda E.F. et al (ed.) (Folktales of India, 1989).

Popular tales presenting delicate patriarchal underpinning and objectifying gender constructions are taken in to consideration. The study illuminates some marking points like the cultural figurations of womanhood, representations of motherhood, the mother/child relationship, marital relationship, suffering and distress of ageing women.
Sample Examples include *Champavati, Tejimala, Silonir Jjiyekar Sadhu, Tula aru Teja, Katha Besa Burhar Katha, The Fish Head, Kecha Nahar, Dance lady Dance*. A close reading of these tales reveals the images of woman— as a suffering weaker sex with no voice and choice in the normative hierarchy of patriarchal system, as an agent internalizing the gendered identities without any protest and also as an embodiment of power of a different kind. The three stereotypes of women in these tales are—

(a) Young woman— as a daughter and bride  
(b) middle aged women: mother, step mother and co-wives  
(c) old women: mother-in-law, lady servant and lady care taker and lady doctor. (Sarma, 2008, 17)

A daughter generally receives love and care from parents. Similarly, the bride’s position depends on her capacity to well manage her in-laws. She receives love and care from her husband, but if she cannot give birth to a child, her position deteriorates in the eyes of either the family members or the society. She is referred to as a *baji* who is considered to be a very unlucky omen.

Within this horizon of Assamese women’s social life presented in the folk literature, an understanding of the position of women can be possible. Thus the tales selected for study weave a complex matrix in formulating the social vision of gendered identity of women. Also, the gender reflection in these folktales can provide data for constructing a new dynamics of old stereotypes of Assamese women by rejecting, retelling and revisiting the canonical tales from another angles. The tragic suffering of female characters in the tales can be represented as a symbol of indomitable will power of women category to challenge their misfortunes and live in the face of all difficulty.

**6.4. Cultural Figurations of Woman:**

To specify the cultural figurations of woman people generally refer to oral tradition where female identity is projected through her roles of ‘mother’ and ‘wife’. Three major symbols of complete womanhood are conceived as giving birth, upbringing children and successful management of the households. In tales, no direct conflict with this pattern has been noticed. The success of a woman depends on how well she is married and how fortunate she is in bearing a male child and how expert she is in maintaining the household chores. The woman accepts this construct and no direct protest against it is discernible. Also, the preliminary requisite of women for marriage as depicted in the folktales is mainly beauty. In the tales *Silonir Jjiyekar Sadhu, Tula aru Teja*, the merchant and the king agreed to marry the Kite’s daughter and Teja by seeing their beauty.

The tale outlines are as follows:
Silanir Jiyekar Sadhu:

A baby girl was abandoned by her mother because she was warned by her husband that he would sell her if she gave birth to a girl child again. A Kite brought up the girl, and married her off to a merchant with seven other wives. The co-wives created difficulties for her and the Kite’s mother would help her in difficulties. Once, the girl was set to weave a cloth and cook rice. When she called her Kite mother, the latter appeared and performed everything magically. The co-wives of the girl later killed the Kite mother and sold the daughter to a tradesman. She was found wailing on the riverbank by her husband. The merchant commanded his senior wives to walk on a thread stretched across a pit full of spikes. Six of them fell in, while one escaped because she was not in the plot to sell the Kite’s daughter.

(Source: Burhi Air Sadhu)

Tula aru Teja:

A man had two wives; the younger one was his favourite, the lagi while the elder was elagi. The elder wife had a daughter named Teja and a son named Kanai. The younger wife had a daughter named Tula. Once, the co-wives went fishing. The younger one pushed the elder into the water, muttering: ‘As a big tortoise may you stay.’

Later, the tortoise revealed herself to her children and gave them food every day. They became healthy and strong. Their stepmother observed this and came to know the truth from her daughter who accompanied Teja and Kanai. The stepmother then feigned illness and told her husband through an old lady physician that she will be cured if she was fed on tortoise flesh. The tortoise mother came to know this. She told her children that they should not eat the flesh and must bury her legs and bone on the banks of the tank.

Two trees, bearing flowers and fruits of exquisite beauty and taste, grew at the spot. The produce of the trees was in great demand. Kanai refused to give the fruits and flowers to the king unless he promised to marry his sister. The king, seeing the beauty of Teja married her. After the marriage, Teja is faced with the jealousy of the king’s elder wife. The co-wife used to create problems for her from the very beginning. She was guided by her old lady servant. But the king was always kind to Teja. At Teja’s happiness her stepmother grew more jealous. One day she invited Teja to come to her place and after a few days she pushed a thorn into her head and turned her into a myna. Her step sister put on her dress and went to king’s home as per her mother’s advice. The myna followed her. Tula was almost a look-alike of Teja; so the king was unable to recognize her. The myna tried to tell him the truth.

One day he overheard her and asked the bird to perch on his shoulder. The bird flies to him
and the king, finding a thorn in its head, pulled it out and Teja appeared in her real shape. Then the king killed the imposter and cut her into pieces and sent it to her scheming mother. (Source: Burhi Air Sadhu)

Champavati:

A man had two wives. The elder was his favourite. Both the wives had a daughter each. Champavati was the daughter of the younger wife. One day she was sent to gourd the cornfield. She tried to scare away the birds by singing:

Away You the quails
Don’t eat my paddy
I’ll give you the fried rice

Then comes a response from the nearby forest:

I shall have the paddy and rice too
Having married Champavati I shall take her home.

The girl looked around but did not see anybody. She was a little scared. By and the day ended and she returned home.

Next day when she came to the field her mother also came with her. When she sang out:

The paddy I’ll eat and rice too
I’ll leave only after marrying Champavati.

When her mother heard this, she was very much surprised. She went home and reported the matter to her entered. The peasant came to the field with some men, who had responded to his daughter. He did not find anybody. He then faced towards the wood and called out thus: ‘Whether you are a spirit or a man, do come out I give my word that I’ll offer you Champavati in marriage.’

When he promised in this way, a serpent glided out of the wood. The very sight of it terrified the men who happened to be three. What could the peasant do now? He had given his word. Though he did not like the girl it was too much for him to sacrifice her to this serpent. When he told his beloved wife about the matter, the spiteful woman, however, persuaded him to yield. So, he brought the serpent home and offered Champavati to it.

When the marriage rites were over husband and wife were given a room to pass the night together. The peasant’s beloved wife thought, ‘It is well that she has got a serpent, which will eat her up. Good riddance.’ Champavati’s mother, however, sat outside the room,
shedding sad tears, for she was not sure what would happen to her daughter during the night. When the dawn broke Champavati came out, all smiles, and her person covered with bright ornaments. When the beloved wife’s eyes fell on the happy girl she began to burn in jealously. Why should she be happier than her own daughter? So, she persuaded her husband to get a serpent for her daughter too.

After Champavati and her serpent husband had left the peasant procured another serpent for his other daughter. When the marriage was over husband and wife were put anticipating great happiness for her daughter. The serpent began to swallow the bride and she cried out: ‘Mother, I fell a titillation in my feet.’

Her mother said, ‘Daughter, my son-in-law is putting anklets on your feet.’

The girl again cried out, ‘Mother, I fell a titillation in my waist.’

Her mother said, ‘Daughter, my son-in-law is putting a skirt around your waist.’

The girl cried out, ‘Mother, I fell a titillation in my breast.’

Her mother said, ‘Daughter, my son-in-law is putting a breast-cloth around.’

When the serpent swallowed her up to the neck she cried out, ‘Mother, I feel a titillation in my neck.’

Her mother said, ‘Daughter, my son-in-law is putting a string of beads on your neck.’

The girl became silent after this and her mother thought that she must have fallen asleep. Next morning the girl was not to be seen only the serpent was lying there with a full belly. The beloved wife rent the air crying for her dead daughter.

On the other hand, Champavati was leading happy days in the wood. Her only sorrow was that her husband was a serpent, not a human being. One day a beggar woman happened to visit her place and she came to learn of the girl’s sorrow. The woman said, ‘My dear, your husband is not a serpent, he is a god in disguise. When you are in deep sleep at night he sheds his snake’s dress and goes out. So do what I tell you. Tonight you pretend to sleep, but keep awake and when he leaves his snake’s dress to go out, just throw it in to the fire. Your husband will then have a burning sensation in his body and return. Rub oil and water on him and fan him so that he cools. Follow my instructions; you will get him in his normal shape.’

That night Champavati kept himself awake. Her husband felt that she was sleeping. Then she shed his covering and left. As soon as the husband went out, she got up and threw the covering into the fire. When it began to burn, her husband rushed in and began to agitate in pain. She rubbed oil and water on his body and began to agitate in pain. After a short while
he became cool and the girl was delighted to find him as a handsome person. They lived together in great happiness. (Source: Burhi Air Sadhu)

Tejimala:

In ancient time there was a merchant in Assam. He had two wives. The elder one had a daughter named Tejimala. The younger one had no child. Tejimala’s mother died when she was a small child. Her step mother brought her up. She had no genuine love for her, but she had to look after Tejimala only to please her husband. When Tejimala grew up to a girl of ten or twelve, her father took her to a rich man’s daughter of the same age to make friendship with her.

Once the merchant had to go away for quite a few days. He left his daughter under the care of the step mother and said, ‘I am going out on business leaving Tejimala under your care. Take care of her with love. Tejimala’s step mother agreed silently to do so.

She thought it a golden opportunity to torture her as much as she liked.

One day during her husband’s absence, Tejimala wished to go to the marriage of her friend for some three or four days. Her step mother did not forbid her to go. She even offered beautiful dresses to wear in the wedding party. Tejimala was surprised to see the change in the behaviour of her mother. But she did not know that her step mother had placed a mouse in between the riha and the mekhala and some cinders in the khonia. When she opened the bundle Tejimala finds there a mouse and cinders and the clothes all spoiled. She comes home weeping and is given severe beating.

Then she made to help her stepmother in husking paddy. She finds her right hand crushed under the tooth of the husking pedal (dhenki). She is forced to use her feet and these also get crushed. She is forced to use her head which as well is smashed. The evil stepmother buries the body under the eaves of the hut containing the husking pedal. There grows a lao (gourd.) A beggar woman tried to pick a gourd when the creeper spoke out that she was none else but Tejimala killed by her stepmother for some clothes. The creeper was cut down and cast away and tree with sour fruit grows up. Cowboys come to have some fruits and the tree speaks out as before. The tree is cut down and thrown into the river. It grows there into a lovely lotus.

Tejimala’s father was coming home after finishing his business. As his barge was moving returns he is tempted by the flower and wants to have it for his daughter. He asks a boatman to pick it. The flower speaks as before. The startled merchant takes a little chewing of areca nut from his mouth in his right hand and a sweetball in his left hand and says: ‘If indeed you are my daughter Tejimala, change into a salika (mayna) and take this chewing and if not, take this sweetbal.’ The flower changes into a salika and eats the chewing. The merchant
puts the bird in a cage, comes home and asks his wife about the girl. The woman is forced to
tell truth. The merchant throws a towel on the bird and says: ‘If indeed you are my
daughter, change into your own shape.’ Tejimala appears in her true shape and her
stepmother is out. (*Source: Burhi Air Sadhu*)

**The Dead Husband:**

Once Bidhata’s sister gave birth to a baby girl’ He calculated the fortunes of his niece and
said, ‘Everything is all right with her, but she would have to marry a dead husband. ‘The
prophecy so saddened Bidhata’s sister she took her child and left home. She roamed here
and there and at last she with her child arrived at a palace. They stood at the gate there and
called out to the inmates. Nobody answered. The girl wanted water badly and began to cry.

**Analysis:**
In the tale *Silanir Jiyekar Sadhu*, the husband’s authoritarian attitude is reflected in the
demand of a male child from his wife. The wife has no power within the family for which
she has no way out than to leave her baby in the forest. Secondly, the rivalry among co
wives are suggested by the ill treatment of the kite’s daughter’s co-wives.

The tales like *Champabati, Tula and Teja*, it is suggested that marriage to a particular
spouse is the *sumum bonum* to woman’s life. Thus women should be patient, virtuous and
devoted to her husband. The culturally ideal wife is one who can defeat her fate by her
strong sense of morality and chastity. Woman’s identity is totally dependent on her husband.
Without him she was nothing, or insignificant and inauspicious thing. So, Champabati tried
to get back her husband in human from to earn a good reputation in the society. More over
she considered her marriage to a serpent as inescapable fate and tried every means
accessible to her in order to be happy with what was written in her fate. So she has been
figured out as an ideal woman.

The tales like *The Dead Husband* and *Beula and Lakhindar* suggests that the widowed
bride can get back her husband’s life by virtue of the strength of her morality and character.
She should ensure the good health and life for her husband by observing certain rituals like
fasting, worshipping to certain gods etc. But the same proscription doesn’t applicable to the
men. As the life of a widow in traditional society was severely pathetic, so the married
woman observed all the ways available to her in order to safeguard her husband’s life. But
the men was allowed to enjoy the second marriage at the death of the first wife. Even up to
seven wives were allowed in case of man as if they were his property. For man, to have
more than one wife implies status symbol and that is why the king, merchant or high born
persons opted for two or more wives which have been clearly depicted in a number of tales.

6.5. The Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law Conflict:

A look at interpersonal structure of the Assamese family helps one to understand why the conflict between mother in law and daughter in law has been a common phenomenon of every household not only today but continuing from time immemorial. The gender disparity in the Assamese society is maintained in the context of kinship. Assamese family is patriarchal where women are considered as dependents of men first as daughters, second as wives and finally as mothers. According to the custom, the woman has to move towards their husband’s house as a stranger to one another and it is their duties to adjust with the new family at the cost of her own ‘self’. As a new comer to the family, she observes the privileged position of her mother-in-law and to rise to that position she starts struggling and this struggle leads to the final breaking of bond of kinship between her husband and the mother/sister. On the other hand, a mother’s privileged position is also threatened by the son’s attraction to the newly married wife. The society assigns women at this stage to be patient as if her male partner has nothing to do. In this way, the suffering of the woman starts in our society mainly after marriage. The tales contain significant and transparent manifestations of this issue.

The Sample Tales:

Dance, Old Lady, Dance:

There was an old woman. She had seven sons and seven daughters-in-law. When the old man of the family was at his death-bed, he had said to his sons and daughter-in-law: ‘My children, look after the old lady. Take care of her.’ The daughter-in-law, however, felt no obligation to their mother-in-law and whenever their husbands were away, gave her a lot of annoyance. They would take in their hands the pestle of the rice-husking dehnki, shake it and cry:

Dance, old lady, dance
Dance, for the sake of the pertle,
All day you make us dance,
To do so now is your dance!

The old woman could not stand this kind of torture and began to get place and thin. One day her sons happened to notice her state of health and wanted to know what ailed her. Their wives did not allow the woman to speak and themselves declared, ‘Oh, it’s nothing. Nothing ails her.’
The sons nevertheless insisted on knowing and asked, ‘Mother, what would you say?’

In spite of the chatter raised by her daughter-in-law, the old woman just managed to squeeze in a few words: ‘While going to your fields, stops and watch from the way.’

The sons felt that there was something suspicious in the situation. So next morning they made as if they were going to their fields, but did themselves on the way. As soon as their husbands were out of sight, the daughter-in-law pulled the old woman out to the floor and made her dance, saying:

Dance, old lady dance,
All day you make us dance,
To do so now is your chance!

As they were doing this to their mother, her sons were watching from a little way. They now rushed in, caught hold of their wives, gave them a beating and drove them away.

(Source: Folktales of India)

The Fish Head:

There was once an old woman who had both a son and a daughter-in-law. She loved her son very much and the latter reciprocated by taking good care of his mother. One day the lady had a sudden urge to eat the head of a carp fish. She mentioned her desire to her daughter in law but the latter was un-obliging. She would eat all the cooked fish heads herself, or else she would give them to her husband. The old lady would then quietly dip her fingers into her own bowl of curry and ask cryptically, ‘Did you forget, my dear?’ The daughter-in-law’s reply would be short but sweet, ‘Indeed, I deed.’

Several days passed in this way until one day the son overheard his mother and wife talking. He became curious and asked his mother, ‘What is that you say has been forgotten?’ ‘Forget it’, she would answer. ‘It is nothing, my son’, she would say. But the son was not satisfied with this reply. So one day he asked his wife what had been forgotten? His wife then turned and whispered in her husband’s ear, ‘Your mother wants a husband!’ This news was a great shock for the young man. The very next morning he said to his mother ‘Mother, let’s go out together. I will find you whatever you want.’ The simple woman followed her son without asking any questions. After a while the two reached a forest. There the son left his mother’s side abruptly and soon hid behind a tree. The old lady was now left alone. The weather was cloudy and it was about to rain. Soon, therefore, she began to cry out loud saying, ‘Oh, thunder! Don’t rumble, don’t roar. I have been left in the forest because I desired a fish head. Please let my son return home safely.’ The son heard all this from behind the tree. He was mystified and asked his mother to explain her words. The old lady then sorrowfully
recounted how she had developed a desire to eat the head of carp fish and how her daughter in law had behaved. The young man now realized how wicked his wife head been. He took his mother back home. He then gave his wife a good beating and drove her out of the house.

(Source: Folktales of India)

Analysis:

The mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflict as depicted in The Fish Head that concerns a widowed woman who is mistreated by the wife of her only son. First, the mother is deprived of the tasty morsels of fish head that the daughter-in-law should respectfully save for her and second, she is accused behind her back of wanting to remarry. In Dance Old Lady, the same type of rivalry has been portrayed. The wives of a man tortured the old mother-in-law and pretended to their husband that they were looking after her well. But the husband came to know the reality and punished his wives. Moreover the helplessness of a woman during old age and especially if she is widowed is also hinted at.

6.6. Women as Embodiment of Negative Attributes:

In the tales, the women’s wisdom and intelligence are not so prominently projected. Some of them are extreme comments on the character, nature and intelligence of women. These tales can be considered as partial representation of women folk by their male partners.

Sample Tales:

The Head of the Rou is Just Bone:

There lived an old couple in a certain village. They had an only daughter and she had however a short of adopted son, who used to help them in their work and lived with them.

One day the old couple invited their son-in-law to a meal. As their son-in-law was coming, the old man had gone to a nearby lake and caught two fishes, one a rou and other an ari. Now, a fish head is a dainty, and the head of the rou is coveted by everyone, while the head of the ari, however, is all bone, and no one wants to have it.

The old couple’s adopted son thought how he could have the head of the rou, how he could persuade the old lady to give it to him, leaving the head of the ari to her son-in-law. He went to the kitchen and said, ‘Mother, the head of the ari is all fat, while the head of the rou is just bone. Give the ari head to your son-in-law, leaving the rou head for me.’
The simple woman agreed to do what he said. The son-in-law sat for the meal and the old man came and asked, ‘How do you find the curries? It was for you that I managed to catch a rou today. Your mother-in-law is growing old, I don’t know what she has cooked.

The young man expected the head of the rou and dipped his fingers in the bowl of curry, and found there only the long bony head of the ari. The adopted son was waiting for his meal and his mouth was watering at the thought of the head of the rou. But when the old woman left the kitchen for a moment, the dark cat, which was watching all the time, took the fish head and fled. It was not fated that the greedy fellow should have the dainty.  
(Source: Tales of Assam)

The Egg which Won’t Get Cooked:

One morning a man bought an egg and asked his wife to get it cooked by putting it in boiling rice. His wife smiled and put the egg in the pan of rice. After some time she took it out but found that it was still hard. She kept it away and again put it in boiling rice in the evening. The egg did not soften yet. Next morning she again put the egg in boiling rice. When she found that the egg was still hard, she said to her husband, ‘You are getting on in years, but you have not learnt how to find a good egg.’ ‘Why, what’s the matter?’ asked her husband. ‘I have boiled the egg several time, but it does not get cooked. It is not good.’ Her husband took the egg, threw away the shell, and ate it up with a pinch of salt. His wife was surprised at this and said, ‘We too used to eat eggs at my home, but this type of eggs must be different.’ (Source: Tales of Assam)

The Two-Headed Weaver:

In a certain place, there lived a weaver by the name of Mantharaka, which means ‘the simpleton.’ One day, while weaving cloth, the wooden pieces on his loom broke. He took an ax, and set forth to find some wood. He found a large sissoo tree at the ocean's shore, and said aloud, ‘Now this is a large tree. If I fell it, I will have wood enough for all my weaving tools.’

Having thus thought it through, he raised his ax to begin cutting. However, a spirit lived in this tree, and he said, ‘Listen! This tree is my home, and it must be spared in any event, because I like it here where my body can be stroked by the cool breezes that blow in from the ocean's waves.’

The weaver said, ‘Then what am I to do? If I don't find a good tree, then my family will starve. You will have to go somewhere else. I am going to cut it down.’
The spirit answered, ‘Listen, I am at your service. Ask whatever you would like, but spare this tree!’

The weaver said, ‘If that is what you want then I will go home and ask my friend and my wife, and when I return, you must give me what I ask for.’

The spirit promised, and the weaver, beside himself with joy, returned home. Upon his arrival in his city he saw his friend, the barber, and said, ‘Friend, I have gained control over a spirit. Tell me what I should demand from him!’

The barber said, ‘My dear friend, if that is so then you should demand a kingdom. You could be king, and I would be your prime minister, and we two would first enjoy the pleasures of this world and then those of the next one. For they say: A prince who piously gives to others, achieves fame in this world, and through these good deeds, he will arrive in heaven, equal to the gods themselves.’

The weaver spoke, ‘Friend, so be it! But let us also ask my wife.’

The barber said, ‘One should never ask women for advice’. They also say: ‘A wise man gives women food, clothing, jewelry, and above all the duties of marriage, but he never asks for their advice. And further: That house must perish where a woman, a gambler, or a child is listened to. And: A man will advance and be loved by worthy people as long as he does not secretly listen to women. Women think only of their own advantage, of their own desires. Even if they love only their own son, still, he will serve their wishes.’

The weaver spoke, ‘Even though this is true, she nonetheless must be asked, because she is subservient to her husband.’

Having said this, he went quickly to his wife and said to her, ‘Dear one, today I have gained control over a spirit who will grant me one wish. Hence I have come to ask for your advice. Tell me, what should I ask for? My friend the barber thinks that I should request a kingdom.’

She answered, ‘Oh, son of your excellence, what do barbers understand? You should never do what they say. After all, it is stated that a reasonable person will no sooner take advice from dancers, singers, the low born, barbers, or children, than from beggars.’ Furthermore, a king's life is an unending procession of annoyances. He must constantly worry about friendships, animosities, wars, servants, defense alliances, and duplicity. He never gets a moment's rest, because: ’Anyone who wants to rule must prepare his spirit for misfortune.

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The same container that is used for salve can also be used to pour out bad luck. Never envy the life of a king.’

The weaver said, ‘You are right. But what should I ask for?’

She answered, ‘You can now work on only one piece of cloth at a time. That is barely enough to pay for the necessities. You should ask for another pair of arms and a second head so that you can work on two pieces of cloth at once, one in front of you, and one behind you. We can sell the one for household necessities, and you can use the money from the second one for other things. You will thus gain the praise of your relatives, and you will make gains in both worlds.’

After hearing this he spoke with joy, ‘Good, you faithful wife! You have spoken well, and I will do what you say. That is my decision.’

With that he went to the spirit and let his will be known, ‘Listen, if you want to fulfill my wish, then give me another pair of arms and another head.’

He had barely spoken before he was two-headed and four-armed. Rejoicing, he returned home, but the people there thought that he was a demon and beat him with sticks and stones, until he fell over dead.

And that is why I say: ‘He who cannot think for himself and will not follow the advice of friends, he will push himself into misfortune, just like the weaver Mantharaka’. (Source: The Panchantra)

Analysis:

In the sample tales it has been observed that in most of the tales women are presented as epitome of all those negative attributes like foolishness, jealousy, rivalry, greed, disobedience, cheating, aggression and violence. The Assamese women cast in negative roles are shown as manipulator of unwittingly villainous plot to achieve their desirous motifs. In the scheme of their plot they use their husbands as a tool. But it is also to be pointed that most of the attack comes from a woman without the knowledge of her husband. Examples are, Tejimala, Tula aru Teja, Champavati etc.

The two tales The Head of the Rou is just Bone and The Egg which Won’t Get Cooked reflect the foolish nature of woman folk as if they were easy to deceive. The old woman has no practical knowledge for which the step son could easily deceive her by saying that the
head of the rou is just bone. In the second tale, however, the woman’s foolishness has been made a object of humour and satire.

Again in the tale *The Two-Headed Weaver*, some downsides of women’s character have been given a focus in the speech of the Barbar, ‘One should never ask women for advice’. They also say: ‘A wise man gives women food, clothing, jewelry, and above all the duties of marriage, but he never asks for their advice’. And further: ‘That house must perish where a woman, a gambler, or a child is listened to. A man will advance and be loved by worthy people as long as he does not secretly listen to women. Women think only of their own advantage, of their own desires. Even if they love only their own son, still, he will serve their wishes.’ In the tale it has been proved too. A few Assamese proverbs used by the common people conform the foolish nature of women as a class. Examples are :

1. *Stri budhi pralayankari*- Women’s intelligence is disastrous.
2. *Tiri miri bhatou kowa, ei chari jatir sanjat nopowa* - one cannot rely on the women, miri people, parrot and crow .

Thus Assamese women’s intelligence was a point of question in ancient times. They are always considered as subordinate to men. But today the women have come a long way off the social and cultural milieu of oral tradition and have started revisiting the domain of oral literature in search of the actual realities for women in the society.

6.7. Gendered Pattern of the Society:

The dominant pattern of the society framed by gender is encapsulated in the above tales. In all the stories the father figure enjoys the decision making power. His voice is authoritative voice, which is beyond questioning. He can have as many wives as he wishes and he can make one most fortunate by offering his love and care and at the same time the other wives have to suffer a life of martyrdom within the four walls of his palace. The other wives are shown in competition with one another to get a position of *laagi* (the most wanted)

The husbands are often busy in outside affairs like, trading expeditions, voyages, hunting, gathering fuel woods, quest and so on. He has a public domain to move, but the wives have to confine within the four walls of their house. They are to perform their traditional roles engaging in activities like cooking, washing clothes, entertaining her husbands, taking care of their children and in laws. If they are most unfortunate they have to play the roles of co-wives and step mothers. This reflects the existing pattern of the traditional society. If a woman can perform her role according to the established pattern of the society to the satisfaction of their husband then she is ‘good’ but if she protests by raising a voice or with a secret motive she is established as ‘bad’. The good/bad dichotomy clearly reflects that it is
the men who encourage the rivalry between women and subordination to men. If women want to survive in a man’s world, the message is unambiguous - be a ‘good woman’ by exemplifying absolute submissiveness and staying removed and disunited from their sense of feeling equal. On the other hand, if they develop questioning attitude and grow disobedient, they are ‘bad’. So the ‘silent suffering’ is considered as a cultural role of the women set by the men. This ascribed role of women promote women’s rivalry and mask men’s culpability in oppressing women by setting the stage for their jealousy, enmity and competition. Attention is drawn away from men’s wrong doing toward women by depicting women as convincing wrong doers who start revolting against the established code of conduct. The women are deserving of punishment while men go free from any penalty.

6.8. Women as Mother or Stepmother:

It is depicted in the tales that relationship between the spouses affects the relationship with their children. Generally, the mother figure is portrayed as a more caring one for the children whether it is a human being or animal. In the first tale the Kite mother provided utmost care to her daughter. On the other hand the father’s role towards his children often depends on his relationship with their mother. In the tale Tula and Teja, the father was indifferent towards the wellbeing of Teja and Kanai because their mother is not his favourite wife. He provides all care to his younger wife and her daughter Tula. Like in Champavati, the father sent Champavati to keep the paddy field only and later on gave her in marriage with the serpent only because she was the daughter of an elaagi (unwanted wife). In Tejimala, Tejimala’s step mother caught hold of the golden opportunity of her husband’s absence to fall over her. In all these tales the evil is incarnated in the step mother and innocence is personified in the step children.

Among the middle-aged women, the mother figure is always portrayed as a symbol of tolerance and loyalty, who wishes well for the children, whereas the stepmother and co-wives are depicted as cruel, immoral, disobedient, disloyal and cunning persons. They create difficulties in the life of their step-children and co-wives. They don’t hesitate to commit heinous crimes like killing their stepchildren and co-wives to fulfill their desires. In the first tale, the co-wife of the kite’s daughter killed her mother and sold her to a tradesman. In Tejimala the step mother went to the extent of killing Tejimala by grinding without any sense of repentance. In Champavati, it is her step mother who instigates the father to marry Champavati to the serpent with a rivalrous motif. In Tula aru Teja, the younger wife killed the elder wife and, later, even tried to kill her stepdaughter Teja.
6.9. Women as Powerless Section:

In a society where polygamy and remarriage for the man were the socially accepted norm, the woman has no way out than to fight among themselves in order to secure a safe position in their family. Their livelihood depends on their husband’s income. When their husbands remarry, e.g. Teja’s marriage with the King, Kite’s daughter’s marriage with the merchant they grow jealous of the new bride that motivates them to scheme a villainous plot against the new one. In the tale *Kecha Nahar*, the jealousy and hostility between two co-wives have been caused by the pregnancy of the one. It is quite natural that when one’s status, comfort, position and even identity depend upon their male partners, they will develop a sense of jealousy to the ones who come between them. Thus, the powerlessness in a patriarchal value system is the chief promoter of rivalry between co-wives. Sometimes the enmity between the two go to the extent of injuring oneself in order to do harms to their co-wife, example, *Aponar nak kati satinir yatra bhangar kara*. But in the tales it is interesting to observe that the ones who are the passive bearers of the male dominance and silent sufferer of the co-wife’s oppression they are rewarded and others are punished.

Sample Tale:

**The Tale of Kecha Nahar:**

Once there lived a merchant name Paniya Danr. He had two wives, the senior being called Kecha Nahar, the junior Mukuta. Kecha Nahar was pregnant, but before she could give birth to her child, Paniya Danr was called away in business. Mukuta was jealous of her because she herself was not expecting a child of her own. At the time of delivery she persuaded Kecha Nahar to have her eyes tied up and as soon as she was delivered of the child, jealous co-wife, through some magic means, turned her into a snake. The snake said slied out of the house, but before she left, she entrusted the baby to a maid, saying, ‘Tend the child, and whenever it cries out, take it out to the back of the house, I will come and give it suck’. Thus she left. Mukuta let the maid bring up the child, a boy, but she warned her, ‘If you report the matter to the merchant, I’ll not only kill you, I’ll kill the child too. So, beware’. The boy was named Bankowar and he was looked after by the faithful maid. Whenever the baby cried out the maid sought and opportunity and, without the knowledge of Mukuta, came out to the back of the house and sang:

Come out, come out O! Kecha Nahar,
The child is dying of hunger,
He will come, he will come the merchant,
And Mukuta’s bones will crush.
She sang thrice in that manner and the snake came out of a hole, threw off her covering and becoming human again, gave such to the child. After feeding the child the woman put on the snake covering and entered the hole.

This went on for some days. Then the merchant returned and enquired about Kecha Nahar. Mukuta said, ‘Oh, after her delivery she disappeared somewhere, she’s not to be found.’ Paniya Danr found the answer strange and asked about the child. Mukuta said, ‘We have her child. I have looked after the boy myself. There’s the maid too who has helped.’ Paniya Danr took the maid aside and asked her about his missing wife. She was afraid to tell the truth because of Mukuta. She was afraid of the merchant too. She however said, ‘My lord, would you first question Mukuta? For she knows.’ Paniya Danr questioned his junior wife but she denied all knowledge of her co wife. He threatened her, ‘If I find you telling a lie, see what I do to you.’ She said, ‘You can do whatever you like.’

So the merchant turned to the maid. She said, ‘Kecha Nahar will be found, but the problem is how to get her back in human shape, for she has been changed into a snake. Let me ask her what can be done.’ She took the child, went behind the house and sing:

Come out, come out O’ Kecha Nahar,
The child is dying of hunger,
He will come, he will come the merchant,
And Mukuta’s bones will crush.

The snake came out and the maid reported that the merchant had returned and wanted her back. The snake said, ‘you must tell him that I do not want Mukuta punished. She is after all my co wife. If he promises that he won’t punish her then only will I tell you how to get me back in human shape.’ The maid reported to the merchant what she was told and he punished not to punish the guilty woman. The maid then went back to the snake, which said, ‘Keep a fire of rice-husk ready and get some curds. When I get out of my covering in order to give suck to my child, take out covering and in one breath throw it into the fire, then immediately fall flat on the ground face downwards. As soon as the covering is in the fire I will lose my temper and hit to hard on your head and fall unconscious. Ignoring the pain in your head, get up directly, feed me curds, take some of it yourself too, we will then live. And also see that the merchant is somewhere closed by, so that he can throw a stone into my hole and thus block it.’

The maid went and told everything to the merchant and asking him to be close by, did everything as instructed by Kecha Nahar. Kecha Nahar regained her normal shape for good. The merchant kept her hidden for a while and started questioning Mukuta. He threatened her
with death, but the obstinate woman went on denying knowledge of her senior co wife. Then Kecha Nahar was asked to appear. Mukuta could no longer bluff the merchant and had to confess her guilt. In fear of her life she fell at the feet of Kecha Nahar and pleaded for forgiveness. The merchant kept his promise not to punish her, but he said, ‘You are an evil woman, and though I am not going to take your life, you cannot escape some sort of punishment. Henceforward you will have to serve Kecha Nahar as a servant and do all the household chores.’ So he was reconciled with his good wife. He also rewarded the maid in appreciation of her services. (Source: Folk tale of India)

6.10. Thus folktales have potentialities to function in two ways, first they can offer materials to compare the past and present realities of gendered pattern of the society. secondly, they can help in reviving the traditional values of the society to redefine the impact of Sanskara in maintaining harmony both at the personal as well as social level.

The gender based attitudes, themes and ideologies get projected through the traditional tales which reveal the corpus of beliefs and practices that prevailed in Assamese society since time immemorial. The tales function not as a folksy, domestic, entertaining tool, but as a site from which performers articulate commentary upon gender relations of the Assamese society. The present day generation will get a glimpse into the fixed identities and unfair power relations in ongoing and sometimes subtle ways. Folktales can offer the materials to examine sites and raise a challenging voice against the gender discrimination prevailing in a patriarchal society, thereby facilitating the evolution of intervention strategies. Findings from further research in this area are crucial in helping one retrieve the prevailing ideological views of the society and solve modern problems of power relation both at the personal and societal level. Considering the representations of representation in the stories, the narrator is either aware of these issues, or expresses the natural need for self-development and recognition women feel when faced with gender discrimination. The protagonists acquire a space of enunciation beyond the limits imposed on women in the social formation in which the stories are set; this space is attained in the center. Women and girls move from marginal locations to central subject positions. This is possible because the storyteller carves out such a realm by her mastery over his/her texts, which s/he conveys through a well chosen tale. (Bhabha, 1994, 17)

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