Abstract

**GENDER REPRESENTATION IN THE CINEMA OF ASSAM: A STUDY OF REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN ASSAMESE CINEMA SINCE ITS INCEPTION**

Cinema has always played a very important role in documenting time and society through the ages. An important aspect of cinema is that it usually records the world as it is, except for the use of special effects and skilful editing to create extraordinary images, letting people enter into a world of fantasy. Cinema, for over a century has recorded all, whether it is moments of history, beauty or fury of nature, or human emotions. Its’ link with reality makes cinema important. One of the most popular forms of Mass communication and entertainment, cinema has completed a century in India and close to eight decades in the state of Assam.

Assamese cinema has through the years introduced the people of the state with its history, important social issues, culture and tradition apart from simply entertaining them. But all through out, it has reflected upon the Assamese society in various ways, including the status of women here. It is important to note that the first Assamese film itself was a woman centric film.

The study titled, “**GENDER REPRESENTATION IN THE CINEMA OF ASSAM: A STUDY OF REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN ASSAMESE CINEMA SINCE ITS INCEPTION**” is a sincere effort to study selected films from different phases of Assamese cinema, in which either the themes revolve around women or the women characters and their treatment reflect the social norms and traditions of the Assamese society. The researcher, in the process of the research wishes to understand how some of the leading filmmakers of Assam have treated women characters and themes related to women in their films, and how well is it in conformity to the traditions, customs and status of women in the society of Northeast, especially Assam.

**Statement of the problem**

Assamese cinema was born in 1935 with the release of the first Assamese film ‘Joymati’, a historical film that revolved around the legend of Ahom princess Joymati, one of the
most courageous women figures in Ahom history. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, the icon of Assamese art and culture, in spite of many hurdles, went ahead and made the film and chose a women centric story for the first ever movie of the region.

These eight decades have seen hundreds of Assamese films come and go. While some of these films did manage to touch the masses strongly and stir debates and thoughts, many also went unnoticed. Some of the films even made it to the national and international arena winning critical acclaim and awards, among which many had Women play a crucial role in the storyline.

Unlike Dada Saheb Phalke, the father of Indian cinema, Jyoti Prasad the founder of Assamese cinema, did not use male actors to play women in his films. Rather he fought odds and made actual women actors act in the first film of Assam ‘Joymati’.

It is generally believed among the people of the region and other Indian states that women of Northeast, including those of Assam, enjoy a better social status than their counterparts in many other parts of the country. That could be a reason why women came forward to act in the film ‘Joymati’ back in early 1930s.

Though ironically, the woman who played the central character in the film ‘Joymati’, Aideu Handique, only a teenager at the time, was eventually ostracized by her own village people in Upper Assam, for acting in a talkie, a medium where men and women had to work together.

Yet, it is a customary view (As written and discussed by scholars through ages), that most women in Northeast India, including the state of Assam enjoy a better social status in terms of respect from men in the family, freedom and power of decision making in comparison to their counterparts in Western, Southern and Northern India. Irrespective of what strata of society they belong to, women are supposedly more comfortable with the social norms in the region. Tribal women especially have enjoyed a powerful place in the family in many tribes and communities of Assam.

For instance, just to mention a few, academician Fatima Tohsin Sahidullah of Handique Girl’s college, Guwahati, observes in an article by her on Status of women in Assam in ‘The Assam Tribune’ that ‘In Assam the status of women is high in comparison to women of other states in the country. One salient feature in the Assamese society is absence of dowry system.’ She also stated that in the field of education and Female work participation rates (FWPR), women in Assam are in a better position.
Similar views are held by academician Tineshwari Devi in her article on status of women published in Journal of Business Management and Social Sciences Research, January, 2013. She mentions that the literacy rate in Assam for women is 67.27 percent and women do enjoy a better status in terms of education and employment. Though, both these scholars agree that it is the middle class, upper middle class or upper strata women who enjoy a better status and those below poverty line do experience discrimination and exploitation even in Assam.

The present study aimed to closely analyse the representation of women characters in some selected films with women centric or socially relevant themes. Through the study the researcher wanted to find out if the general belief about the status of women in Assam is truly reflected in these films or the filmmakers simply portray Assamese women in conformity to the universal essence of womanhood, their problems and their strengths.

The study also hoped to examine whether the women characters, being portrayed in Assamese films (Focusing on the chosen films), have undergone changes through the times and how gender sensitive are the filmmakers here.

The study aimed at closely viewing selected films by some renowned and some new filmmakers of Assam and analyzed major women characters in those films with main focus on the representation of women. Also the treatment of women characters and handling of the themes in these films have been discussed. Most of the chosen films are either women oriented, reflecting upon some serious social issues concerning women and traditions of our society or, films where women play a central role in dealing with social issues strongly affecting the Assamese society.

The study has divided the eight decades of Assamese cinema into four phases like Pre independence, post independence, from ‘1970 to 1999’ and contemporary phase from 2000 onwards. The films for the study have been chosen accordingly, though availability of prints for some old movies has remained a big challenge for the study.

The study stands unique as very little work has been done on the Assamese film industry and hardly any research has been carried out on gender representation in the cinema of Assam.
Methodology

The present study has been designed to follow qualitative method. Studies on any one specific filmmaker’s films have been taken up in the past but no research work has been done on Assamese cinema in relation to representation of women in Assamese films as a whole. Hence the area of study becomes unique. The researcher has also applied syntagmatic analysis coupled with critical discourse analysis and in-depth interviews. In the present study the selective sequences of the films have been analysed. The women characters have been interpreted according to the cultural conventions and codes conveying meaning on symbolic and indexical levels.

The researcher has first of all sieved out films from each phase of the eight decades of Assamese cinema depending on their importance to the study and availability of the prints in case of the older films. Analysis of the films in relation to representation of women on screen, which does not mean only the leading lady’s character, but also the other significant women characters in the chosen films and how women’s issues are represented in those films, including, how the women characters are positioned vis a vis the believed status of women in the Assamese society has been done.

Furthermore, the objective was to investigate the role of cinematic language with regard to construction of gender. The reasons for undertaking such a research are several and they lie mainly within the salience of gender within cinematic discourse. The data source consists of a set of twelve films which are by and large women centric or women oriented films produced during the four phases: pre-independence, post-independence, 1970 to1999 and contemporary (2000 onwards), period by different film makers of the Assamese film industry. The preliminary data for analysis was selected from the following list:

The list of films analysed in the course of the study include names like:

1. **Pre Independence** = Joymoti (1935) by Jyotiprasad Agarwala
2. **Post Independence** = Tejimola (1963) by Anwar Hussain
3. **1970 to 1999**
   (a) Srimati Mahimamoyee (1979) By Pulak Gogoi
   (b) Buwari (1982) by Siva Thakur
   (c) Agnisnan (1985) by Bhabendranath Saikia
4. **Contemporary** = (2000 onwards)

(a) Hiya Diya Niya (2000) by Munin Barua
(b) Akashitorar Kathare (2003) by Manju Bora
(c) Patni (2003) by Pulak Gogoi
(d) Dhunia Tirutabor (2006) by Pradyut Deka
(e) Aideu (2007) by Arup Manna

The study includes in depth and structured interviews with filmmakers, film critics, film actors and film scholars from within the state. This method has been chosen as this saves time and is also cost effective as a larger number of people will be interviewed simultaneously. This method is likely to have a snowball effect adding to the value of the research by bringing in new information and dimensions.

**Conclusion from response of experts**

The researcher has taken help of in depth interviews for compiling expert opinion for the study. In total twelve important members from the Assamese film fraternity were interviewed, which includes award winning filmmakers, film producers, veteran actors and film critics.

While some of them spoke about individual films that have been included in the study, some spoke about Assamese cinema in general. They also shared their views on representation of women in films of Assam through the decades and the impact of women centric films on common viewers.

The views of the interviewees overall, on the social status of women in Assam and the issue of impact made by women centric films or women characters in those films has remained pretty much similar. While some say that the power of women is not being fully utilized or reflected in our films these days, some feel that representation of women in Assamese cinema, through the decades is justified in majority of the films, when compared to many other regional film industries in India. Some interviewees say that
Assamese films through the decades have shown women as decision makers, or they have tried to give a realistic representation of women, whether in an urban setting or rural Assam.

Most of the film critics and filmmakers agree that, the older Assamese films have done more justice to representation of women than the new ones. Some say that serious filmmakers have been doing justice to representation of women for decades in their films, but since commercial films reach to more audiences, even commercial filmmakers need to treat their women characters in a more realistic manner.

The Status of women in Assam, all of them agree, is definitely better compared to other parts of India. Even though, some of the filmmakers and other interviewees agree, that small incidents of gender bias take place here and there, within homes or in organizations, but overall our films represent women in high status as per the general belief on the status enjoyed by women in Northeast India.

But majority of the interviewees say that, films of Assam can still do better in exploring the social status of women in Northeast India including Assam. A few filmmakers and producers also say that, the general belief that women in Assamese society enjoy a better status is true, but again the degree of this belief differs from home to home and situation to situation.

Some explain that a filmmaker always tries to create some impact through their films and some characters. But in Assam not much impact has been seen in ideologies, or even behavior and trends in fashion, through films. Yet another observation is that impact of Assamese films has not been very highly noticeable because, majority of Assamese cinema viewers are in rural areas. These viewers see an Assamese film just as mere entertainment and not as something thought provoking. This sums up the mosaic of views expressed by the members of the film fraternity through the conducted interviews in the course of the research.

**Conclusion of the study**

Most of the films, taken for the study, show women as strong individuals and adhere to the general belief on the status of women in Assamese society, where women are believed to enjoy a better social status. This is appropriately reflected in many of our
films through the decades, as the researcher has observed after studying the selected films.

Yet, somehow a patriarchal point of view also creeps in, in some of the films at times, where even a strong woman character ultimately depends on a male protagonist to achieve some final goal. Or in some cases, women’s identity is always attached to some male member in her life.

This is reflected where Akashi, in ‘Akashitorar Katha Re’ questions her mother in law, why you or I have to be recognized as someone’s wife, or sister in law or mother and not as Durga or Akashi?

Similarly, in ‘Buwari’ directed by late Siva Thakur, just because Rongili, the main protagonist, is now without a Husband, does not mean she has to necessarily act weak and depend upon some cruel relatives for survival. She might be submissive, tolerant and sacrificing in nature yet she can be strong and independent. She somehow did not try hard to reveal that strength in herself in the film. Though, through Rongili the filmmaker has shown an ideal woman, as expected by the society in general, and the film also focuses on the importance of women in Assamese society and the respect given by men to women here.

In ‘Hiya Diya Niya’, the central protagonist Momi, is a rich spoilt young urban girl who prefers western outfits, late night partying, and enjoying life to the full in her own way. She wants to marry an NRI, as if that is her ultimate goal. Sunita, Momi’s friend, is different. She is also an educated girl with an urban upbringing. But she mostly likes to dress up in Indian outfits, spends time at home cooking and cleaning as shown in the film. Two contrasting personalities of the new generation women in reflected here, but finally the soft and submissive Sunita is hailed higher by all and Momi eventually follows those traits that Sunita has to be liked better by all.

Now again, we see what a woman should be like in view of the male dominated society. Hence, both ‘Buwari’ and ‘Hiya Diya Niya’, subconsciously establish what men in the Indian society expect of women, irrespective of what strata the woman belongs to, but at the same time, the two films do show the women protagonists as enjoying much respect and importance from the male characters.

This is where Maadhan’s character in the film ‘Patni’ stands out, where she remains a bread earner, feeding her husband and children, without ever developing any false pride.
in her. Even when her husband’s male ego creeps in, she silently takes over the charge of the home maker along with being the bread earner without much complain. The power of women in all aspects is revealed well here, and the filmmaker has done justice to the believed status of women in Assamese society.

In ‘Tejimola’, the story revolves around victory of good over evil, and there is stereotyping of women where the good one stands for innocence, simplicity, kindness and tolerance, the bad one is evil, witch-like, shown in dark clothes with crooked expressions all the time. But the status of women is hailed high even here, giving importance to the girl child by the father and other characters in the film. The rich father’s concern for his girl child Tejimola even in an ancient rural backdrop is remarkable.

Again, coming to ‘Srimati Mohimamoyee’, though the woman protagonist in the film gives much comic relief through her miserly and mean ways, yet the film hails women in high esteem. While Mohimamoyee is a victim of economic inflation and patriarchal social norms, yet the men in the film, like Nabin and Ananda or other women characters like Karabi and her mother are all shown fighting social injustice and highlighting justice and respect for individuals, especially women, who have stood against the patriarchal biased values.

In ‘Abartan’, the woman protagonist has been kept on a higher platform by the filmmaker, in spite of the stigma of being a lose character woman thrust upon her by the patriarchal society. The filmmaker has created an honest, bold, yet humble and selfless character in Jayanti. Her virtues are strong enough to let the viewer ignore her past where she was exploited by men. She is not a helpless victim, though sadly she is not only professionally exploited but is also used by her parents and siblings for their vested interest.

She finally gains courage and insight to follow her heart and start living for herself without harming anyone. Parimal, as a male friend, never imposes anything on her. Both, Taru the senior actress, and Parimal himself, make Jayanti realize her strength and worth and she emerges strong and establishes a woman’s important status in Assamese society.

In ‘DhuniaTirutabor’, the film is much dedicated to women, and there is no stereotyping of women as such. The new generation, bold and professionally confident women are
highlighted, yet some universal insecurities in women, irrespective of their social strata or profession, is also highlighted well. Though it is a male character Partho, who helps the central protagonist Chayanika realize the value of her talent and life in her middle age crisis phase, yet the film beautifully maintains the gender balance and abides by the belief that women in Assamese society are better off in social terms.

Now coming to more serious films like ‘Agnisnan’, ‘Phiringoti’, ‘Aideu’ or ‘Joymatí’, these films have presented women characters that are not only thought provoking, but also impactful in a positive manner.

A calm, homely and caring woman is seen turning bold in the film ‘Agnisnan’. The filmmaker shows Menaka’s strength and intelligence and portrays women within the confines of the set social norms in Assamese society, where they command respect and authority. Menaka, a victim of her husband’s betrayal, goes through phases of strength and weakness, finally emerging strong and also smart in her moves.

The story revolves around Menaka’s ordeal when her husband betrays her trust and gets a second wife into the house. She initially breaks down, but finally emerges a winner by avenging the humiliation in such a way that it shatters Manikanta’s (Her Husband) male ego and arrogance forever. The film definitely in its own way justifies a woman’s rights in the society and establishes gender equality.

In ‘Phiringoti’, the filmmaker very convincingly, through the character of Ritu, tells us what a woman is capable of when she is determined. Ritu, could have also sat silently and drawn the government salary, like her previous male counterpart, who took money from the government as a teacher, while he never taught a single student in twenty years. Shunning such corruption, Ritu decides to brave all odds and bring a revolution in education in the village. The moral support of her father and the constant support from the villagers, make her journey a little easier, after initial hurdles.

The building up of the school step by step, runs parallel to the way she once again takes control of her life after many ups and downs.

The first ever Assamese film ‘Joymatí’, very strongly depicts the high status of women in Assamese society through the characters of Joymati, Seuti and even Dalimi for that matter. Joymati, stands for courage as well as a woman’s motherly and caring instincts. The character knows to keep a balance between emotions and the practical realities of life. Her sacrifice gets the viewer thinking about the strength a woman can have.
Similarly, the character of Aideu, who ironically helped immortalize princes Joymati (Played by Aideu Handique on screen), suffers social injustice in real life. But, the film ‘Aideu’ based on the real story of Aideu Handique, shows how this young village girl bears all the pain with dignity and in her own way, and tries to stand against injustice.

The immediate impression of Indian movies is that all are depicting an established formula, where the good woman is usually vulnerable and innocent, mostly good looking and also helpless or lacking in intelligence. The bad woman is either sensuous or scary and wicked even in appearance. But Assamese cinema, especially as seen through most of the films taken for the study, has not stuck to this kind of stereotyping in the larger sense. Films in Assam, through the decades, have dealt with serious issues concerning the society, and women in majority of the films, rather than only showing romance and escapism.

The costumes and the settings have mostly been derived from the socio cultural context in these films. Some of which have even shown traditional customs, values and lifestyle of the local people in details, giving it a highly regional character.

The women in most of the films are dressed either in traditional Chadar Mekhelas or Sarees and some in Western outfits. But not in any of the film, included in the study, has any filmmaker tried to objectify the woman or give her a sensuous look for the ‘Male Gaze’ as termed by feminist writer Laura Mulvey. In fact, most of the films deal with the strengths and weaknesses of the women. The characters are mostly treated with respect, whether positive, negative, strong or weak, comic or in serious roles, the women represented are realistic.

The filmmakers, in majority have tried to represent women in their films by abiding to the general belief on status of women in Northeast, and some have also tried to establish equality of gender, where men and women need to run the society with equal amount of strength and responsibilities, without anyone considering himself or herself as more superior. Many of the filmmakers have hailed the power within women high.

But interestingly, the women characters in the mentioned films, though might have undergone transition in terms of their outfit or appearance in certain films, yet the overall essence of woman hood, and traditional values in these women characters has remained consistent through the decades. Whether it is princess Joymati, Aideu Handique, Menaka
or Tejimola, (Who portray characters from older times), they all dress up in traditional costumes and hold on to the cultural and traditional values.

Even if the women protagonists in contemporary films like ‘Hiya Diya Niya’ or ‘Dhunia Tirutabor’ wear western outfits and are shown as smart or financially independent, yet they retain their strength of character and dignity even with their broad outlook.

At the same time, Akashi, Jayanti, Mohimamoyee, Maadhan or Roma, represent women characters who are socially aware and speak their mind when required. Some of them though are financially independent, like Jayanti, Maadhan or Roma, while Mohimamoyee and Akashi, though are financially dependent on their husband, yet they have a sense of rationality and ability to think and act intelligently. Though it’s a different matter that, Akashi, initially a bold and ambitious character, finally gives in to circumstances after marriage. The same kind of values and dignity is retained by most of the women characters in the selected films in spite of their social, economic or cultural background. Some are more educationally qualified and earn, while others manage the home successfully. There hasn’t been much distinct transition in the role of women protagonists through the decades in Assamese films, as observed through the selected films.