



## Discourse on Bezbaruah's *Burhi Air Sadhu* : a postcolonial perception.

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### Abstract

Bezbaroa's collection of folktales in three volumes is a very popular literary piece of work in the colonial period. Among these, *Burhi Air Sadhu* attracts the postcolonial literary critics the most. Several debates and dialogues are going on involving the issues like gender, morality, reconstruction and deconstruction of the folktales of *Burhi Air Sadhu*, facilitating the thrust to represent the mind of the society. Postcolonial hegemony opens up some plural, complex and contradictory literary interfaces. This paper is an attempt to analyze the post colonial voice in association with the emergent culture and literature.

**Keywords:** postcolonial, literature, discourse

Postcolonial studies, including postcolonial literature, have popularly gained attention of the scholarly groups during the last five decades. The usage of the terms 'post-colonial' and 'postcolonial' varies. By 'post-colonial' the historians specifically refer to the period after a country or people cease to be governed by a colonial power. But the term postcolonial tends to embrace literary, cultural and sometimes anthropological studies (Innes, 2007: 1). Thieme argues that "the field hitherto variously known as 'Commonwealth Literature', 'New Literatures in English' and 'World Literature in English' has been reinvented and re invigorated as 'Postcolonial Literature' (Theime, 1996:1) The word postcolonial seems to put forward the thrust of concern for national culture and tradition in the chaotic social and cultural atmosphere after the departure of imperial power. The course 'postcolonial' covers all the cultural and literary practices persuaded by the imperial rule from the dawn of the colonialization till date, even after independence. It also acknowledges the power relation between the colonial and the colonized in the cultural exchanges. India, along with some other countries of the world colonized by the British Empire, observed a remarkable

flowering in the field of literature in English. In this period the authors tried to reshape their identities and nationalities through judging and criticizing their original source of knowledge which is remarked as folklore of a society. In the field of literature, postcolonial perspective engulfs various issues like ethnicity, authenticity, politics of survival, politics of nationality formation, politics of history and some other traditional concepts which are laid in the genres like folk culture and tradition. It is observed that the indigenous literature is occupying a pivotal position in theorizing the postcolonial literature or the so called 'New English'. Likewise, the postcolonial theories seem to provide a framework for analysis of the indigenous literature.

In India, the British tried to establish a group of English speaking Indian people's class so that they can provide support to the British administration. This class later on tried to renovate their own culture and tradition by writing the glory of their past in both vernacular and English languages. Lakshminath Bezbaroa started his literary career just before the historical post-colonial period. Bezbaroa compiled the folktales scattered all around in the fertile soil of Assamese folk mind into three volumes, among which *Burhi Air Sadhu* is

immensely the most popular. Bezbaroa had done this as a part of the issue of 'National Consciousness'. Through this effort Bezbaroa tried to rescue the glory of the past from the grasp of the colonizers. In 1915 Jnanadabhiram Barua (1880-1955) translated some tales from *Burhi Air Sadhu* under the title *Folktales of Assam*. After him Pallabi Barua, Deepika Phukan and Aruna Devi Mukherjee had translated the tales from this collection. Besides these, Sanjeeb Kr. Nath and Nandana Dutta have put forward some scholarly discussions in addition to the translation of the tales. One renowned Assamese folklorist Prafulladutta Goswami had provided an analytical study on Assamese ballads and folktales in his scholarly masterpiece *Ballads and Tales of Assam* where he included some tales from *Burhi Air Sadhu* and this seems to be the beginning of the postcolonial thought on popular folktales in general and on *Burhi Air Sadhu* in particular.

The transitional cultural thought popularly enriches the postcolonial literature on the folkloric items. This paper will concentrate on literature written in English on folktales of *Burhi Air Sadhu* (1912) collected by Lakshminath Bezbaroa. The postcolonial literatures on this folktale collection peep in the field through different genres such as articles, research papers, reviews and lectures.

Bezbaroa's **Introduction to *Burhi Air Sadhu*** is a masterpiece in itself in the field of Assamese folktale discourses. This is because he came to collect the folktales as a well informed expert in this field after an in depth study. Here he talks about the harmony of human thought and imagination. He speaks of the moral dimensions of Assamese folktale analyzing the word *Sadhukatha* (synonymous Assamese word for folktale), which may be interpreted as "moral story". Bezbaroa's introduction is valuable for many reasons. Folktale is the 'biography' of a community, because it preserves rites, rituals, values, customs and a composite worldview of the concerned community. In the introduction he discusses on importance of folklore, methods of collection of folktale, Herder's influence on development of folklore study, Bopp's view regarding the origin of Tuton, Celt and Hindus corroborated by folktales, types of folktale, migration of folktale and the meaning of the Assamese term *Sadhukatha*. (Dutta, 2011-2012: 9-12)

The Assamese folktales have its heritage value. Most of the changeable versions of the folktales captures the old motif but differs due to the dialects spoken in upper and lower Assam and due to its oral

nature. Assamese folktale genre is rich with humorous or trickster tales. This extremely popular genre has the most striking feature that is political and social satire. *Gangatop*, *Latkon*, these are some example of such types of tales.

Sanjeev Kr. Nath, in his fascinating work *The World of Assamese Folktales* discussed about folktales in a scholarly way. In this work the author discussed the tale collections of two eminent persons one is Lakshminath Bezbaroa and the other is Troilokyaswari Devi Baruani. In the preface he declares, "I have focused on two main topics of discussion: how women are represented in the world of Assamese folktales, and how the tales sometimes seem to questions the givens of caste and class hierarchy in society." But the minute observation shows that besides these two main topics of discussion the book also provides the discourses on folktale morals. The author has heard the voice of social satire in folktales. He writes that many of our tales voice concern over or present criticism of issues like the oppression of kings, tyranny of priests and superstition among people. (Nath, 2011)

*Mothers Daughters and Others*, a book edited by Nandana Dutta, includes six folktales in the section of 'Assamese material' from *Burhi Air Sadhu* which give emphasis on the gender issue. Though this book basically argues on the gender discourses it also discussed the issues like the text-context-texture of folktale and about the constructive cultural roles of it. The six tales from *Burhi Air Sadhu* included in this book are basically 'Women tales' though the representation of women is pathetic "because a women in a tale may be a composite drawn from literature, social reality, and the patriarchal stereotype or idea" (Dutta. 2012:10). Since the women of north eastern part of India are enjoying greater freedom and are living comparatively in better position, representation of women in the folktales also shows the female stereotype specific to the culture of this region. In *Panesoi* women are shown treated as an object of desire or a piece of property by the males. There is no question of willingness of the girl in her own marriage. In *Ou kuwari* also the girl remains as an object of male desire and the whole tale is full of various stratagems by which he achieves the bride. Polygamy and bigamy was accepted in Assamese society and there is the reference of *lagi* (beloved) and *alagi* (not favourite) wives in most of the Assamese tales. *Champawati* is one of such tales where there are two wives one is *lagi* and the another is *alagi*. The concept

of this *lagi* and *alagy* is the result of the 'male gaze'. *Tejimala* is the depiction of a woman's envy towards a woman. In the very beginning of the Kite's daughter tale the bias against women in the society is noticed. In the very beginning the wife of the potter who gave birth to a number of girl child was threatened to sale her to the Nagas. In this tale the kite's daughter is represented as a meek, innocent and helpless creature and her character is the socially accepted ideal feminine character. *Champavati, Tejimola, Tula-Teja*, or the kite's daughter has the motif of jealousy for a rival woman, a step mother or daughter, a step sister or a co-wife (Barua, 1999: 43).

'Son-in-law' types of tales are not women centered but often told by the females and seem to be the creation of the female fantasy rejecting the male hegemony (Handoo, 1999:74). Regarding the gender conflict in the Assamese tales Kishore Bhattacharjee opined that in Assamese folktales the cases of gender conflict are rare, instead there is noticed rivalries among women, most commonly among step mother-daughter relation and co-wife relations (Bhattacharjee, 1999: 31-37).

After the analysis of the tales from *Burhi Air Sadhu*, there is observed the prevalence of certain women stereotypes such as caring, sharing, nursing, cooking, weaving and rearing. Fertility and beauty of a woman is a thing of very much concern. The male counterparts often manage polygamy for quest of beauty or offspring. The tales represent the expectations of a society from a woman and contributes a lot in construction of an ideal womanhood.

Since the folklore tradition shows the potential to reinforce the sense of nationalism it becomes the popular vehicle to run the process of national resurgence through postcolonial literature. Specially, folktales restore the values and mores of a nationality. The quest for ideology and nationalism within folklore inspires the postcolonial writers to explore this lively antique field. The above discussed literatures on the folktales of *Burhi Air Sadhu* by the scholarly persons indicate the popularity of folk literature as a giant part of postcolonial literature. According to Clifford there is no postcolonial culture or places but only the tactics and discourses. Yet 'postcolonial' describes the current struggle and imagines the futures (Clifford, 1997).

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