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Women's Short Story Writing: A Narrative Site For Constructing Identity

All narratives of identity, being embedded in the notions of difference and opposition, are political. The identity of an individual is the subject position, which is normally addressed in terms of a specific marker or signifier, say, religion, language, community, class, gender, age, etc. The irony is that an individual or a group always holds multiple subject positions, simultaneously problematizing the issue of identity construction in any given situation. The logic of essentialism, however, is the driving force in all the contexts of identity formation including gender. As a result, it seems that the feminist drive to assert a separate identity for women has to subscribe to the essentialist logic of gender identity, undermining the need of addressing the problematics of identity from a ground that accommodates or at least responds to all differences. However, even without putting a singular emphasis on woman's purely different identity, one cannot undermine the centrality of the issue about woman as an attempt to recover her subject position. It is against the ideological assumptions constituting patriarchy's totalitarian discourse that woman strives to articulate her voices and constructs her counter discourse in a move to assert her power of agency which has traditionally been denied to her. Thus, the assertion of female identity amounts to a determined agenda of recovery of woman's space, which is in no way a denial of the presence and reality of other forces and other voices.

A reactionary drive on the part of the 'second sex' to recover herself from a given position of inferiority and subordination in the gender hierarchy informs short story writing in Assamese, a fictional genre that accommodates contending voices within its small but adequate space without compromising with its aesthetic liabilities. This chapter is devoted to a discussion of the multiple ways by means of which myriad issues impacting woman's subjecthood are foregrounded, debated, dismissed and refashioned in the narrative space offered by women's short story in the Assamese language. It is interesting to note that contending voices and disturbing silences emerge from the narrative site showing the problematics in the formation of female subjecthood that impedes any tendency to arrive at a stereotypical solution. This chapter will try to bring to the fore the representation, in Assamese short story writing by female authors, of some of the issues and concerns which are identified

as of primary importance in the agenda of recovering and consolidating the agency of the female gender.

What constitutes female identity? How does it differ from that of the male? Certainly, woman's body is made to play a substantial role in the politics of gender differentiation although men alone manipulate the terms of the game most unjustly. So, the need to challenge these irrational terms is to be given primacy to subvert the norms and woman in order to unlearn the normative language of patriarchy must resist with the resources and power of her body, the body to which man responds with fear as well as desire. The female body allows woman to enjoy the unique privileges of those resources which are denied to man. As woman journeys along the terrain of such physiological changes as puberty and motherhood, these experiences are accompanied by emotional and mental transformations of tremendous import. The female authors explore this subject as an exclusive area of creative capacities experienced only by the female. There indeed are stories written by male authors on similar subjects but in most cases, their perspective remains at the level of an outsider's gaze in view of the very nature of these experiences pertaining to woman's body. Women's location as insiders in the female body-specific experiences is sure to make their narratives of motherhood, puberty and similar other issues different in a number of ways. The following study attempts to highlight these ways by means of which contemporary Assamese woman writers explore these experiences as celebratory as well as defining in constructing an identity of the female.

Motherhood: Redefining Female Subjecthood

With the spectacular rise in the number of short story writers in the 21st century, proliferation of fictional narratives on motherhood as an exclusive zone of female experiences itself is a proof of the primacy given to this subject as a defining marker of woman's identity. But the writers' narrative engagement in this area follows a trajectory which is undeniably different from the generation of previous female authors as we get to see that their approaches to the chosen material range from being celebratory to critical and thereby even redefining the very concept and ethos of motherhood. A striking feature of the portrayal of woman's identity in terms of her motherhood is the refusal to equate motherhood with woman's procreative capacities and activities.

Arupa Patangia Kalita, a short story writer and a novelist of repute, entered the world of fiction writing in 1980s and is now considered an important voice in this field. Many of her stories centre around a female character in her role of being a mother but the subtlety of treatment of these stories consist in the underlying subtext that invites the conscientious readers to look at the apparently innocent and fulfilling role of the mother from a critical perspective. As the narratives proceed, a sense of disturbing unease comes to the surface making it obvious that these mother figures are only participants in the patriarchal politics of gender discriminations as they subscribe to the social conditioning with an unthinking submissiveness. These narratives are not intended to be eulogically celebratory of woman's role as mothers, but on the other, they urge the readers to apply a discriminating awareness in understanding the role of the mother-figure as complicit in the politics of gender subordination. "BDD Aru Xopun Besa Sualijoni" (B D D and the Dream-selling Girl) is illustrative of this sort of situatedness of woman in the male dominated society. Dowry deaths, female foeticides and similar other outrageous evils reported from the northern and western parts of India are not common occurrences in the northeastern states but even here we should not feel complacent about the safety and dignity of our daughters. How much our mothers really care about their daughters? Are not our mothers behaving as female patriarchs in their relationship with their daughters? Arupa's story raises these questions as the female protagonist's biased treatment of her daughter to serve her son's interest only reflects the way a woman internalises the patriarchal prejudices against the daughters. Her worthless son, a married man, depends on his sister's small income and the mother shamelessly tries to fulfil his demands while her daughter Umi has to face the odds of life all alone. Umi overworks to bridge the wide gap between her small investment and her dream project of starting a beauty parlour in one part of her parental house. Meanwhile, things get more difficult as her younger brother, a parasite on her income, devises schemes to grab the whole property by marrying Umi off to another spineless, worthless man. Umi, however, is strong and formidable enough to dismiss the joint move of her brother and mother to displace her from the ancestral property as she has intelligently formed a friendly and purposive alliance with Namita to start her combined business venture. She will not allow her brother and mother to decide her future by ousting her from her paternal house, nor will she remain dependant on them financially or emotionally. She attempts to secure a ground under her feet with Namita's help, who is also seen as a burden by her brothers and mother. Sharing similar situations, their sense of solidarity gets consolidated to put a combined force of resistance in front of the design of the patriarchal camp. Rather than projecting a glorious picture of motherhood this story reinforces the power of sisterhood or

female alliance and identifies it as the essential condition of empowered womanhood. The mother figure, on the other hand, is diagnosed as infested with all the prejudices of a patriarchal set-up that inhibit the growth of a healthy temperament in the male children. Here, sisterhood functions as the healthy life-enhancing force, a politicised power of resistance in the face of the negative power of motherhood. This story makes a point that a woman can become a mother only by unlearning the given terms of the discourse of motherhood scripted by the patriarchy and if she only becomes a poor instrument of appropriating stereotypical thinking, then sisterhood offers a better alternative to respond to woman's dreams and needs. Motherhood can define woman's identity if it can earn a space for itself and chart its own mode and strategy of action, which obviously requires rejection of the stereotypical views on gender relations.

Motherhood is judged critically to the point of caricature instead of upholding it as a delicate subject for sentimental effusions of feelings in Arupa's story "Putrar Karone Eta Gorom Jacket" (A Jacket for Her Son). Here too an over-indulging mother shamelessly remains servile to her adult son and takes awkward pleasure in catering to every petty demand of her son, already a married man with children. She wants to see the young man in a beautiful pair of shoes and a gorgeous jacket and she pays frequent visits to her married daughters' places with a secret plan. She goes to their houses with an empty large suitcase and comes back with her suitcase stuffed up with a fashionable jacket picked up from her grandson's cupboard, a used shaving cream belonging to her son-in-law, a purse and many other things, which have been lying unattended in her daughter's house in the city. The narrative dispassionately presents the mother's ridiculously obsessive concern for her adult son in amusingly minute details that elicits readers' condescending pity for her, but the subtext of the story puts an uneasy question: is it not a burden of motherhood taken to its extreme to cater to the needs of one's male children? Should a mother lose her self-respect and dignity to conform to the image of a self-effacing, self-sacrificing mother, upheld as the ideal picture of motherhood in the patriarchal set-up? Needless to say that the behaviour of the mother verges on psychic disorder, a malady that reflects the dominant mindset of the society. If woman has to establish her individual identity, she must refuse to play the role assigned to her by the authoritative forces in the given power structure. These stories of Arupa register an implied statement: motherhood by itself cannot acquire an independent identity for woman until and unless it prescribes its own ethos independently and realises its responsibilities beyond the limits set by patriarchy. A woman can assert her subjecthood through her performance of the role of a mother only when she can set

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the terms of motherhood by herself. Every role is a performance, no doubt, but if the performance is manipulated solely by the dominant side then it fails to define the person in question but only represents the voice of someone else.

Anamika Borah has written a number of stories on motherhood but each one of this category of her stories invites critical attention from the readers because each one of them is invested with multiple meanings and varied dimensions of motherhood. Her well-known story "Ebah Polur Bhumakotha"(The Saga of Silkworms) treats the subject of motherhood in a way that is far from being conventional. Here is a woman who rears a cluster of silkworm with such care and compassion as a mother brings up her children. She takes pains with a sense of pleasure while collecting food (mulberry) for them, she talks to them, coaxes and cajoles them and eagerly keeps listening to the sound they make while chewing the mulberry. Her concern for their well-being, their sounds, their sights fill in her small world with a sense of happy contentment. By facilitating an easy emotional bonding with them, Joymala, the woman of the story not only internalises the deeper connotations of motherhood but also extends her motherhood instincts to the world of non- human beings dissolving the borders between the two worlds. In a word, the gap between these two never exists for her. The idiom of her attachment to them exhibits an easy felicity of give and take, which normally characterises the mother and children relationship. Rearing silkworm is a culture of bygone days and Anamika's story nostalgically reflects how much our village women are missing out on a cultural practice that reverberates with spiritual and emotional gains.

Mousumi Kandali's approach to the subject of motherhood as constitutive of woman's subjectivity is remarkably radical. Her story "Tritiattwar Galpa" (The Story of the Third Space) wants to assert the argument that motherhood is not a gender specific experience but a state of felicity that can be shared by an individual irrespective of gender. The narrative of the story argues for dissolving the borders of gender-centric fixed categorisations on the ground that gender is only a performance. The male protagonist of the story refuses to perform his role in the first two categories of gender and opts for the third state of fluidity where fixities dissolve and he can choose to become a mother. An archetypal story of an old man sailing towards the third bank of the river is alluded to in this story as a recurrent motif. We are so habituated to seeing things in terms of bipolarities that the third bank always eludes our perspective. In the story within the story, there is a recurring reference to an old sailor who, shedding off the conventional thinking, believes that the third bank of the river is within his reach and his son too proudly declares in front of the curious onlookers that the sailor setting

his sail for the third bank of the river is his father. Here in this story, Mousumi extends the meaning of the old man's archetypal search for the third bank of the river to the contemporary context of gender and shifts her focus to the tale of a young man. At some points in the narrative, the two tales seem to overlap as they are intended to complement each other. The narrator in the present tale is initially embarrassed when she comes to know about a gay young man who has made a candid confession that he wants to be a mother. But the narrator, reflecting on the tale of the boatman sailing in search of the third bank of the river, subsequently realizes that if the third state is the truth of life, then a man's desire to become a mother too partakes of a third possibility beyond the limits set by the first two gender categories. The young man has really found a way of experiencing the joy of motherhood. He has adopted a baby girl, a homeless orphan, a humanitarian gesture invested with a sense of individual fulfilment. The narrator of the story visualises for the girl a future like that of the boatman's son-----both of them can see beyond the fixities and celebrate pluralities. Looking at her foster parent, one day the girl will proudly proclaim before everyone: 'Look at that man. *He is my mother*' (Page: 112). "The Story of the Third Space" is more than a story of gay relationship, loneliness and fractured intimacy (There is an oblique reference to the male protagonist's brief and unsuccessful affair with another man). The story in fact brings into light a gay individual's aspiration for internalising the other privileges of womanhood. Though his affair with his male partner was very short-lived, his abiding interest in motherhood has remained as the enduring passion of his life. Setting aside the conventional perception regarding gender roles and responsibilities, a world kept at the periphery as belonging to the 'other' is brought closer to the heterosexual readers' world-view. The story also dismantles the feminist convention of valorizing the female body as the sole source of reproductive capacities, unknown to the male sex. Instead of celebrating the female body as the only single entity that can engender a new life and affirming women's corporeality in its differences from that of men, the story shows the gaps and fractures in the rationale of othering the male as essentially different from the female. Though human subjectivity is conventionally supposed to be embedded in the sexually specific body, the male protagonist of the story situates himself beyond the essentialism of gender in his refusal to subscribe to the logic of corporeal subjectivity. An interesting dimension of the story is that while feminist thinking finds fault with the male othering of the female, "Tritiattwar Galpa" (The Story of the Third Space) critiques the female othering of the male as equally sexist and regressive. Here the narrator ruminates:

"Oh! in vain we get imprisoned in the language of stereotypes, we think motherhood is an exclusive privilege of the female. Who says it is specific to sex? Specific to body? The uterus, an organ of the body, is not essential for being a mother. What one needs is a uterus of understanding and sensitivity. The little infant, fast asleep on his lap, is born of his uterus of copassionate understanding. She will be the Mahadevi of his dream. Just a few days back, a few religious fanatics destroyed a religious monument, as we all know, hate-mongers burnt down houses and people lost their lives in that devastating fire of hatred. His Mahadevi was throbbing with life amidst the debris of burnt down houses, smokes, dust and dead bodies! He picked her up to his lap. Will she one day be able to make sense of this motherhood which is manifest in him?" (page:111)

The third space in which the male protagonist can participate in the experience of motherhood and which is no longer considered the exclusive privilege of the female, reminds one of what Virginia Woolf called 'androgyny' where the fixed line of demarcation between the two genders does not exist at all. Mapping the world of motherhood beyond the binaries of male vs.female or father vs. mother, Mousumi identifies it as a space where these polarities dissolve and the notion of pure identity becomes only a myth. "The Story of the Third Space" has been subjected to lots of misinterpretations leading to such oversimplifications that it is a vulgar tale of homosexuality. However, the truth is that the story celebrates motherhood as enabling experience for all, irrespective of gender and insists on the need to liberate it from the constraints of gender. In a word, motherhood is not a marker of female identity alone, on the other, it is an open zone that makes fluidity and fluctuation in the assertion of identity possible. We have seen in case of Arupa's stories that a woman, in spite of giving birth to children, fails to become a mother with a female mind, while in Mousumi's story even a man can become a mother through his mind, if not through his body. Both the writers make a point that motherhood cannot be equated with gender alone, as it involves complex processes more of the mind than that of the body.

The unconventional treatment of motherhood in Mousumi's story might create a misleading perception that the new generation of authors refuses to treat motherhood as a special resource, enabling woman to secure a space to call it her own, a unique marker of woman's identity. The specially empowering energy of woman as located in the experience of motherhood nevertheless receives glorifying creative investment from the female authors. Purabi Bormudoi, Anuradha Sarma Pujari, Manika Devi, Gitali Borah are some of the short story writers who examine the power of motherhood as a defining experience for women.

Purabi Bormudoi, an established fiction writer, treats the mother figure in a celebratory way in a number of her stories. Written in a lyric mode, her story "Rodor Rong"(The Colour of Sunshine) explores metaphorical correspondence between a woman and the irradiating sunshine. A mother is an everlasting fountainhead of boundless energy and compassion. Mothered by everyone, the mystical persona of a girl called Pritty, the focal point in the narrative, is said to mother everyone with her compassionate care and in this way by rising beyond the limitations of time, representing all the mothers of the world, she becomes ageless. In yet another story, "Ma" *(*Mother*)*, Purabi Bormudoi shows how a flowing river, being the life-blood of the village folk, reverberates in the imagination of a boy with all the positive energy and capacity associated with the image of a mother figure. The boy cannot subscribe to his school teacher's views that the word 'river' is a neuter gender, because for him the river is a living presence and she epitomizes all the significations associated with the mother principle. In Bormudoi's fictional world, woman shares in the creative abundance of nature and assimilating nature's benign presence becomes nature's counterpart in the human world.

A mother has immense power to prevent the operation of disintegrating forces in the domestic sphere though sometimes it might cost her individuated space. This is the resolution a mother works out in the stories of Manika Devi. Her story "Niyor Pai Mukoli Hol (A Touch of the Morning Dew) brings to the fore the suffering in the life of a little boy, since his mother lives separately from his father. The estranged mother has ultimately come back. The narratorial voice also seems to patronize her decision taken in the interest of the child's healthy upbringing. No doubt, the story upholds the self-sacrificing image of motherhood and wants to valorize the role of the mother as indispensable for the safety and welfare of the future generation, but the negotiation she has to make and the self-abnegation it involves is underplayed, keeping little space for her own personal growth and her necessary resistance to the forces inimical to her individual identity. The story ignores the construction of a dialogic space, which demands the involvement of both the parents and holds them accountable for the evolution of a healthy social environment. It is ironical that women invest her mental energy for the benefit of the children and social stability and fail to gain political wisdom about her own rights and dues! In the story "Banawas" (The Exile), Manika reconstructs the epic character of Sumitra as a woman who enters into a humiliating deal with her co-wives to bask in the glory of motherhood. Sumitra desperately promises to dedicate her sons Laksman and Satrughan to serve Kausalya and Kaikeyie's interest if they help her become a mother. In her obsessive desire to become a mother, Sumitra not only puts her sons' interest at stake but

denigrates her womanhood as well. Mother-fixation receives critical treatment in yet another story of Manika, "Xorishrip" (The Reptile). Motherhood is a passing phase and if a mother refuses to loosen her hold on her son, married to another woman, it will only create clash of interests and instead of being a life-giving force, it only disrupts healthy relationship between the male and the female. In this story, a man fails to connect mentally and emotionally with his wife because he is unable to form a healthy conjugal relationship outside the orbit of mother-fixation. Motherhood as a common thematic thread binds a good number of stories written by Manika, but avoidance of singularity in narratorial perspectives save these stories from being sentimental glorification of motherhood ethos. Instead of upholding the traditional image of docile mother figures, her stories explore both the privileges and pitfalls of motherhood.

Woman's Body: A Site for Contending Voices

When a girl reaches the stage of adolescence with the onset of the first sign of puberty, she becomes a sex-object in the eyes of the society. As an object of both fear and desire for the male sex, she is required to obey some strict codes of conduct that keeps her constantly reminded of her subordinate position and limitations supposedly imposed on her life by her own body. The norms of tradition, personal safety and a prospect of future marital happiness are invoked and the girl begins to live under the impression that puberty is a burden rather than a natural process to womanhood. Female writers are responding to the patriarchal strategy of undermining and regulating the female body in a variety of ways. Anamika Bora's "Konyakal" (Female Adolescence) reclaims traditional femininity by means of celebrating the first sign of puberty as a resourceful experience and a turning point in the life of a woman. A group of village women look at another woman with pity because her daughter has not yet reached the stage of puberty. It hurts her ego. However, her joy knows no bounds when one day she discovers the first sign of flowing blood in her daughter. It is a thrilling occasion of victory for her that has nothing to do with the inhibiting societal norms, taboos and traumas. It is a moment of pure celebration of the female body, meant only for women. The other side of the reality is foregrounded in Arupa Patangia Kalita's story titled, "Pach Chotalor Kothokota" (Narratives from the Backyard). The female protagonist of the story, a researcher on the social conditions of the 19th century women, particularly child widows, visits Kolkota National Library for consulting relevant documents. She feels as if through the yellow pages of the

brittle books and journals, the forgotten faces of the widows and their mothers have come alive as she finds herself totally absorbed in the tales of their sad plight and naturally, she gets overwhelmed with a spontaneous surge of sympathy for them. Herself a mother of a small girl, she feels at the same time a sense of self-complacency that she is distanced from those unhappy days by more than two centuries. However, she could not live in her comfort zone for long, since just after her return home, she shockingly finds herself in a tight spot, seeing her own world of happy domesticity about to crumble under the weight of societal pressures, not much different from those experienced by the women of the 19th century. Gyanadasundari's mother, a 19th century character coming alive in front of her, reprimands her for failing to come out of her deluded state in these words:

> " Like you, leaving my husband in his bed, I too got down from my bed to be with my daughter lying in the floor, to console my widow daughter in tears. Your daughter is not a widow, of course! But she is scared of being a widow. Is it not the same thing? Was my daughter a widow? No man touched her, but she lived a widow's life! How can we afford to be different? Don't we have the same women's body?" (page: 27).

When Junu Hazarika's daughter Majoni has attained puberty, elderly women of her family including her mother-in-law are very insistent about the girl's strict adherence to some stringent norms failing which, as they say, she will be doomed to a life of early widowhood. To her utter surprise and dismay, Junu, has found that even her daughter has completely internalised the threats and fear of her grandmother as she refuses to listen to her mother's arguments that these rules are nothing but some knots and traps, which never allow a woman to be herself, and are meant only to stall individual thinking of woman. Majoni, who would later realise the truth and agrees to unlearn the stereotypical text of male dominance, is used initially by the upholders of patriarchy only as a site for implementing their ideological presumptions and in that sense her mental make-up resembles that of 19th century women. At the concluding part of the story, however, she refuses to drink the holy water as part of the cleansing ritual prescribed by the purohit in the end of the first period of adolescence. The purohit curses her with early widowhood but that could not shaken the mother and daughter's faith in woman's individual worth that consists of both her body and her mind. Through her rebellious gesture she refuses to remain confined to the 19th century time and asserts that woman is not an ahistorical figure to live a life within the unchanging frame of tradition, she can make her individuated space change with time.

In our society, woman's body and beauty is defined in terms of the societal norms framed as per patriarchal perceptions, which remain humiliatingly indifferent to woman's selfhood. In the story titled "Venusor Pushak" (Venus's Apparel), Arupa documents through the plight of a woman how woman's bodily integrity is threatened in the prevailing set-up that refuses to acknowledge her emotional and mental selves. Atoki, the middle-aged woman, could not get married because her five feet ten inch height posed a serious problem for her in the marriage market that runs on the unwritten prescription that woman has to be shorter than man since woman is lower than man in every respect. This woman is only one amongst many village women who have to remain spinsters for some 'bodily defects', some for being too thin, some for being too fat, some others on similar other grounds. Atoki was advised in her marriageable age by her well-wishers to fetch a pair of water-filled cauldrons from far-off ponds and to carry cow-dung filled baskets on her head to lower her height! As time passes, Atoki's height and brown-coloured eyes have now become a cause of envy for her young niece Jupi and her friends. They say, with her five feet ten inch height, untied tresses flowing down on her long white gown (which they have forced her to wear) and brown eyes she is looking so gorgeous that she could have easily won the crown in a beauty pageant. On the surface, it seems Atoki's bodily beauty ultimately has a new batch of appreciators, as if the new generation has suddenly earned the power of recognising true beauty! Things, however, are not as simple as that. Atoki's story establishes the fact that there is no change in the male perception of female beauty and what is more alarming is that the net of male gaze upon female body is only extending, making woman's identity more vulnerable in the new culture of globalism and commercialisation. There indeed is no difference between those village women who gave Atoki some tips as to how to look short to survive in the marriage market and the new generation of smart girls who mindlessly parrotise the criteria of female beauty as scripted by the market forces. The tall physical constitution of a girl is now neighbours' envy as it has more saleability in the global market. In a word, the male perspective on the female body is remaining the same, though the yardstick to measure up her beauty keeps changing. Arupa's stories reveal the truth behind the appearance with the implied warning that to curve out a place of her own in the face of global forces, which denigrate women's individual identity at every step, woman must denounce the terms and conditions set by those market forces, the hidden face of patriarchy.

Marriage and Family Life: Feminising identity vs. Exploring images of subversive woman

The institution of marriage, which plays a major role in the life of a woman in the traditional Indian family structure, keeps little space for her individuated selfhood and on the other hand, woman herself becomes a site for projecting man's ideologies. Marriage is considered an essential prerequisite for the growth of a female from girlhood to womanhood as it secures for her a man to protect and lead her in the course of her life. This societal obligation makes the institution of marriage a farce in woman's life, lowers her self-esteem and commodifies her position. In a story titled "Bonphool" (Name of the female character), Anamika Borah very poignantly draws the picture of a young woman who, rejected and betrayed by many prospective suitors on many occasions earlier, is left with no other option but to accept, on her poor helpless father's advice, the weaving loom as her groom. An underlying vein of mockery at the institution of marriage is strongly pronounced in the language of the narrative as in the end of the story, Bonphul, the weaver girl married to her loom, still keeps wondering with her vigilant eyes and inquisitive ears if someone is at her gate with a proposal to marry her! Suggestive hints are given to indicate that her marriage vows are too fragile to carry the burden of her unsatiated bodily instincts. In yet another story titled "Jolashoy" (The Water Body), Anamika addresses a similar situation in the life of a woman but this time the protagonist is more of a rebel than a muted victim of an oppressive system. Basundhari has long passed her marriageable age. In her youth, she herself turned down a number of proposals and now her mother and brothers, holding her responsible for her spinsterhood, asks her to marry whoever comes to her rescue. They say, her acerbic tongue and false pride have destroyed her life. However, Basundhari does not listen to anyone! One day an elderly man has come up with a proposal of marriage, the only condition he has set is that since the bride at this age is incapable of giving birth to children, her family will have to pay a sizeable monetary compensation. Basundhari not only denounces the offer in utter contempt but shows before the society that contrary to its perceptions she is capable of carrying a child in her womb. No one could ask her who has fathered the child and that aspect of her secret liasion is rendered irrelevant by the very fact that she has to prove that her womb is still fertile and she is a human being, not a commodity to be bargained off in the marriage market. Since people humiliate her body and ignore her mind, she registers a fitting response through her body. Her language of protest is entrenched in her body, the body that subverts the male presumptions on the female body. Asserting her subject position outside the convention of marriage she has

proven the power of woman to act subversively and think differently in a given system. Anamika has written a number of stories on the lives of women like Basundhari who refuse to fit into the image of ideal femininity and are not afraid of getting society's censure and contemptuous rejection. Basundhari is thrown to the margin of the society as a mad woman who has lost her mind. In yet another story of Anamika, people make fun of a woman, Bhadreshwari (a character from the story "Bhade C P I") for her daring acts of exposing various instances of corruption amongst the people who have inflated notions of their self-importance in the society.

There is at work the strategy of othering the urban woman to glorify the picture of simple, innocent village woman as an ideal image of feminine self. This rural vs. urban rhetoric is constructed mainly to reinforce woman's place on the side of tradition and denounce the urban women as the deviant pursuing the narrow interest of individualism in the area of modernity reserved for man. Patriarchy functions in subtle ways of discursive practices and constructing images of rural women as repository of ideal feminine virtues is aimed at rejecting modern women of urban societies as fallen and perverted. This trend of polarising rural and urban women in two separate categories is undoubtedly grounded on a false logic of essentialism which also disguises the manipulative design of exploiting the female sex as weak and vulnerable in need of male protection. Female authors engage their writings with this subject with a view to exposing the pseudo-sympathy as entrenched in a strategy of confining women in a zone of tradition that protects only male interest. Bonti Xensua is not a very prolific writer, but her stories while sketching out the difficult lives of women in the gender-biased society represent the ways women have to negotiate with the dominant forces of the society to make a space for her and pay heavy prices for going against the grain. Bonti's "Halimi Burhi" (Halimi the Old Woman) traces the lonely life journey of a woman called Halimi who lost her husband at a young age and has given birth to a mentally retarded child. According to the village people, her husband himself invited his sudden death as he incurred the wrath of the invisible powers by cutting down a huge tree in his compound and rendered the good spirits, who inhabited the tree, homeless. Halimi, who could not afford to stay young in front of the voyeurist men folk of her village, capitalizes on their superstitious minds and spreads the news that her estate is protected by the snake deity who wears a crown of pearl and that she herself is a witness to the serpent's irradiating pearl dazzling from under the floor of the granary where the deity has made his new home. The naughty boys of the village are too terrified to venture out into her estate and the young and old alike are also equally frightened to

tread upon the boundary of her compound. Halimi is a fighter who even goes out to plough in the field after her husband has died, an activity woman is not allowed to do. The villagers make fun of her struggle by giving her a name 'Halimi' (a coinage from the word, 'haal', meaning the plough), that has erased her earlier identity. She has a biting tongue and a sharp mind to make stories that she is being protected by the king cobra. But how long? As the narrative throws light on the guilty conscience of a male character, it becomes clear that gradually Halimi's protective shield which she built up in the form of a mysterious stories of magic world collapses and she falls a prey to the intrusive evil designs of her male neighbours. Like her backyard garden, an exact metaphor of her life, she, too, is plundered by the male intruders and one day she dies. The narrator remarks: ''Halimi, the old woman remains alive in the little narratives of magic and mystery. She won't die....''(page: 28). A notable aspect of the story of Halimi is how poor lonely women have to wrestle with the world outside and how they have to construct narratives in the form of myths and fantasy to resist the patriarchal forces inimical to their survival. This also explains to some extent the rise of popular belief regarding witchcraft, which leads to ruthless murder of women in our society. Halimi makes a magic world around herself only to protect herself, but the dominant voices of the society give a different twist to these tales and construct their own counter narratives to hide their crimes and project women like Halimi as witches. The story does not give a clear answer to the question as to how Halimi has died. May be she has fallen a victim to the power of the counter-narrative constructed by the dominant male voices to destroy the power of women like Halimi! Nevertheless, the story focuses on how women have to wrestle hard to gain subjecthood and how they remain vulnerable to the disruptive forces of denial all the time, implying that acquiring female agency is bound to be fraught with constant confrontation with the oppositional forces for retaining the space; it is a slippery ground which woman wants to protect as her individuated space and man wants to exploit as a site for testing his gender-related perceptions and to relegate her to the object position.

Sisterhood: Female coalition displacing motherhood

The subject of sisterhood is an underplayed issue in Assamese women's short story writing, its political import is yet to be recognised and explored. Female fraternity is usually undermined and looked down upon as gossipy and superficial and its positive potential as the foundation of revolutionary reawakening ignored. Despite that a new trend has been set in the

women's writing of recent times as stories of female alliance are receiving attention in increasing terms and on some occasions the subject of female bonding has even displaced the theme of motherhood as more challenging and radical in its content and import. Rita Choudhury, a well-known novelist, has written a story named "Ramdulari Aru Purushtantrikota" (Ramdulari and Patriarchy) where a lady professor tells the story of her empathy for another woman who is a safai worker in the same college campus where the professor works. It is said that sisterhood is only a myth rather than a reality because two women belonging to two different social classes and backgrounds rarely form an alliance to stand against the forces of patriarchy. In Rita Choudhury's story, however, the narrator draws a convincing picture of female bonding because the narrator, after knowing Ramdulari's life of misery, finds in a moment of retrospection that her life is not in any way different from that of Ramdulari, both being the victims of the same system of patriarchy. Her realization comes to the fore in these words:

> " May be, there is a Ramdulari hiding somewhere deep inside me! A helpless Ramdulari, traped in the norms of the society and defeated in the hands of patriarchy?"(Bochoror Galpa: 2012: Page:15-121)

Initially, the professor-narrator feels sympathy and compassion for Ramdulari for her soft and amiable nature. Ramdulari also shares with the narrator her sorrow of not being able to become a mother. The narrator gives her small advices for improving her poor health. One day Ramdulari has become a mother but her husband, a safai worker in the same college, takes least interest in the welfare of Ramdulari and it could not surprise the lady professor when one day she has come to know about Ramdulari and her new born's death. One day Ramdulari's husband shamelessly approaches the professor with a request for money as he is planning to get married in his native place in Bihar. No doubt, the professor, enraged at his audacity and male chauvinism, has vehemently turned down his request but this experience has brought her face to face with a bitter truth about her own life as a woman, the truth that there is no essential difference between Ramdulari and herself. In an introspective moment of self-scrutiny, she experiences an intimate feeling of solidarity with that poor helpless soul. She knows that with all her sophisticated apparatus of social life, she is equally defenceless against the onslaught of patriarchy, which is too visible in cases of women like Ramdulari and subtly manifest in the lives of women like herself.

As Rita Choudhury's story shows the prospect of sisterly alliance beyond the borders of class or social status, Arupa Patangia's story titled "Pach Chutalor Kothokota" (The Narrative in the Backyard) explores the possibility of forming female bonding across time and space. We have discussed the theme of the story in the context of patriarchal presumptions on the female body in one of the preceding sections of this chapter. But an important dimension of the story is its focus on the need to retrieve our forgotten mothers who were most unjustly forced to pay heavy prices for maintaining the inhuman, gender-biased tradition and have been denied a place in the history of modernity. The female researcher of the story, while pursuing the lives of the 18th century widows in academic interest, finds no reason to compartmentalise her life from their lives. As she turns the pages of old journals and documents, the century-old poor faces of those poor widows come alive as if they are her own foremothers representing the entire race of womenkind telling their tales of oppression and at the same time pleading her to save her own daughter Majoni from similar situation of subordination. Her research has enabled her to forge a new alliance with the absent women characters of history as the ressurected faces of those women have given her the necessary mental energy to fight the powerful tradition of patriarchy. A similar character of a woman researcher plays a lead role in yet another story of Arupa, "Tilator Ipare Aru Xipare" (On Both Sides of the Hillock). Here, however, Arupa paints a different picture of the same situation. A group of researchers present seminar papers and hold discussions on the issues of women empowerment on the other side of the hillock where the university campus is situated, and on this side, the narrator, who has also been a participant in the seminar, comes in contact with a stark reality of female subordination involving a family. The five daughters in the said family have to remain half-starved because their mother treat them as secondary species in comparision to their only brother who has the first stake on everything in the family. The daughters have to save for their own marriages which, however, offer only a very dim prospect of happiness in their lives. Under these circumstances, the subtext of the story raises many pertinent issues and questions like connecting the academic world of women studies with the real world of flesh and blood women. If the problems of the real women are not addressed in a mode of sisterly solidarity, then these issues will always remain unresolved. Arupa Patangia's stories demand sincere critical attention from the readers primarily because her stories are path-breaking in arguing and investigating the necessity of displacing motherhood by a radically challenging form of sisterhood. Instead of celebrating motherhood in a sentimentalizing vein, her writings identify habits of patriarchy functioning under the mask of motherhood and plead for its vigorous resistance under the united strength of female fraternity. We have seen how in the stories like

"BDD aru Xopun Besa Šualijoni"(B D D and the Dream-selling Girl) female friendship is pitted against motherhood. "Jnot" (The Knots) unfolds the other side of the matter by pointing out that absence of a feeling of solidarity brings in envy and downfall to the lives of the two women whose socio-economic status are totally different. In her story "Xunali Eagole Koni Parile Beliye Umoni Dile" (The Golden Eagle lay Eggs and The Sun Hatches), Arupa maps the trajectory of black women's subordination from the early periods of slavery imposed by the whites on the coloured class of people to the present time with the central focus on how things have been changing in the last two hundred years. Here the writer, crossing the boundaries of her local and immediate socio-political context, extends her sense of female bonding to all the persecuted women of the world. In contrast to the scepticism of the critics of sisterhood, who dismiss the idea of female alliance as an impractical utopian ideal in view of women's differences in class, race, religion, etc, Arupa's story explores the possibility and need of enlarging sympathy for all the women of the world in a drive to attain the power of agency for a single class of people, i.e, woman.

Women writers are not equally capable of exhibiting ingenuity in identifying the power of sisterly alliance in subverting the design of patriarchy. In a story written by a young writer Gitali Borah, a man brings a second wife since his first wife has failed to give him a child. Written from the perspective of the first wife, the story titled "Ghasphul" (The Grass Blooms) gives a tragic glimpse of the inner world of the first wife who has to undergo terrible experiences of neglect and humiliation, with her unsatiated physical urges and emotional needs making her married life nothing more than a farce. But she finds a new phase of life as her bodily desires have metamorphosed into maternal instincts of care and affection for her co-wife Rambha's son, Buman. Krishna, the first wife, visualises for herself a happy future with Buman protecting her like a true child from all the pitfalls of life. She has found a new identity in motherhood the meaning of which extends beyond the biological but Krishna's story of investing motherhood with unconventional connotation underplay some other possibilities implicit in this tale. The author of the story, while glorifying motherhood in its extended non-biological dimension, maintains a disturbing silence about the possibility of forming a strong female bonding between the two wives, both being victims of the same system of patriarchy. Krishna's emotional dependence on her co-wife's son may be read only as a self-made trap that contains and controlls her oppositional stance against the system of patriarchy. This story, however, brings into light the play of multiple forces, which contest with each other for gaining the ground to define the role and identity of woman in the socio-political life. We see similar

situations emerging in some of the stories written by another young writer of the present generation, Manika Devi. The pull between motherhood and sisterhood informs the storyline of Manika's story, "Sakhiyoti" (Companions) and at the end of the story motherhood is shown as subsuming the energy of sisterhood! Here two women journey together along a long path to their respective maternal homes. Although they belong to different social status, the woman from the village extends her helping hand towards the town woman to make their journey easy and enjoyable. However, their alliance has neither earned a deeper symbolic dimension in the larger context of sisterhood nor made any lasting impression on them. The story ends with the conclusive note that they have parted their ways to reach back home, to be in the company of their own children. These two women have transformed themselves from daughters to mothers as is suggested by their coming back from their old parental homes to their present addresses and in this journey, their new identity as sisters have been lost or remained in the margin only as a passing phase.

Revisiting Myths and Folktales: Towards Constructing Female Identity

Myths and folktales are the repository of the collective consciousness of the society. However, what we call collective consciousness and memory is not a neutral zone, it is indeed a terrain of contestation of oppositional viewpoints patronised by different sections of the society. The oral and written discourses in the form of myths and folktales represent the dominant voices and those have been being proliferated and transmitted down the ages as the controlling mechanism in the play of power. Needless to say that our mythical and folkloric literature were the cultural documents of registering the patriarchal ideology of male superiority and female subordination as the eternal given. They are the totalitarian discourses aimed at constructing stereotypical images of ideal feminine behaviour. What is seen as a common thematic material in the folktales and myths is that any deviation from the prescribed norm is considered a gross violation of the ideals of justice and is shown as duly punished under a divine dispensation. Questioning these time-honoured treasures of knowledge system and exposing the political manoeuvre behind it is, therefore, an essential feminist drive or prerogative for dislocating the gender-biases and retrieving the lost and silenced voices of the female. The Western female writing of 1980s exhibited a new trend of reinventing and restructuring the female archetypes from female perspectives. Mention may be made of writers like Angela Carter who deconstructed most of the Western fairy tale characters in the most

radical way. Mahasweta Devi in Bengali literature has been adopting a similar approach in her rewriting of mythic tales from Mahabharata and Ramayana. Unconventional adaptations and appropriations of folkloric and mythical situations and characters have indicated the beginning of a new development in the field of short story writing by female authors in Assamese in the first decade of the 21st century. Recovery of the female agency has become a favourite praxis for the female authors, fitting into their creative search for a new way of challenging the traditional premises on gender relations. Nevertheless, it will be an oversimplification to assume that these writers are breaking a new ground with this sort of approach. Here we are examining the variety that characterise these female authors' agenda of critiquing the politics of formulating gender stereotypes in our folk and mythical discursive practices.

Rashmirekha Borah is a new face in the field of Assamese short story writing in the middle of the first decade of this century but she has shown the signs of a promising career through a handful of stories one of which is "Moinamotir Xocha Xadhukotha" (The Real Story of Moinamoti). This story is a retelling of the well-known folktale "Champawatir Xadhu" (The story of Champawati) in "Burhi Aair Xadhu" (Grandma's Tales). Published in 2011, Rashmirekha's story foregrounds the untold story of suffering and struggle in the life of Champawati's sister, who did not even have a name in the original version of the folktale. Written in the first person narrative, the half-sister of Champawati (the only identity she is allowed to have in the folktale) introduces herself as Moinamoti and speaks in her own voice (the first step in the politics of recovering subject position) the narrative of her resisting all forms of oppressions embodied in the symbolic figure of the python. In Rashmirekha's adapted version of the folktale, the demonic role of the jealous stepmother is displaced by the python in its role as the destroyer of the downtrodden, his massive belly crushing down each and everything coming on his way. The folktale, as we all know, projects the python as the epitome of a mysterious, magical, all-powerful male power capable of showering divine benedictions on the good people, an instrument of divine justice. Here in the deconstructed tale, the python is projected as an archetypal figure of male authority whose qualities of love, care, protection, beauty, riches and mastery are all rooted in fantasy. Demystifying the enigma surrounding the python, Moinamoti denounces the old tale for the textual neglect assigned to her and at the same time asserts that she has an independent identity of her own, while Champawati, her elder sister and the main protagonist in the folktale, is allowed to become only a textual signifier to serve the interest of the python, the devastating image of injustice masked as justice. Moinamoti, doomed to perish in the textual margin, resurrects herself as a real human being as

she has earned the secret knowledge about the design of the python to master the whole world and resolves to subvert the scheme by standing with the power of the masses.

> "My dear little sister. Your story was finished the day after the wedding night. Our father along with the villagers tore off the python's belly to bring you out that morning, you know."

This was Champawati reminding her sister how her story displaced that of her younger sister, called 'Moinamoti' by the narrator of the reconstructed tale.

Moinamoti replied:

> "That was only a story my dear elder sister. Now I am going to tell you my true story. It was not easy even for the whole lot of villagers to tear off the python's huge belly. To give way to your tale, my story was finished then and there! As your story began to move in a long track, I chose my own pathway.....since then, as I am not a tale, I am still on the move, roaming around in frenzy amongst the people, half-dead, half alive. I keep dreaming of coming out along with them from out of the python's huge belly. Tearing off its belly, we will snatch away all the massive heaps of merchandise, gold and pearls we have lost to him" (Bochoror Galpa:2011;Page: 253).

If Champawati's role is confined to being only a textual tool for the aggressive and manipulative voice of patriarchy in the traditional narrative, Moinamoti has retrieved herself from the location of textual margin to assume the active role of championing the cause of all those, marginalised in the mainstream history of human progress. In this retold version of Champawati tale, Champawati has lost her mind after peeping inside the python's belly, while those terrible sights of violence could not unnerve Moinamoti's spirited resolve to fight back for the right dues of the whole of mankind: "I am dreaming of my rise from inside the belly.....of snatching away heaps and heaps of golden treasure we have lost to him." The ending of the story also subverts the traditional pattern of drawing happy conclusion in the folk tales:

True stories never conclude.

Our clothes have got drenched in blood

We could not return....we could not return.(page:253).

In the original version, the concluding lines read as: The tale has come to an end/ our clothes are soiled as well/ we have hurried back home. The inconclusive ending of the story, presenting a picture of violence indicates that the story of resistance only begins here. The story strikes an unprecedented note by reasserting female subjecthood independently of male discursive intervention and discovering new import in the marginal female characters of the folk narratives.

Gitali Borah's forte is rereading of myths, folktales and glorious episodes of history from the perspective of the female, unravelling the working of patriarchy in the representation of idealised pictures of masculinity and femininity through these narratives. Gitali Borah's reinvention of mythical females, however, remain at the level of depoliticised resistance as she ignores the importance of articulating their voices and concerns in a context of dialogic interactions. This is because her female characters' sorrowful perceptions remain distanced from the oppositional forces, the possibility of confrontation is consciously avoided and the rise of political awareness acquire, at the most, a monologic character. Her female characters in their self-pitying, self-absorbing thoughts are far from being in a position of independent agency or subjectivity. Her collection of stories, "Nirabadhi Niranjana" (The River Niranjana Flows), comprises a number of stories the sources of which are drawn from the epics, folktales and Jatakas (Buddhist literature). In "Nirabadhi Niranjana", the title story of the collection, Gitali investigates, in the context of Buddhism, the way women's sacrifices are thrown to the margin of the society by the religious mythmakers while exalting Buddha's image as the saviour of mankind. In the Indian tradition, an ideal male archetype is one who can 'rise' above the petty claims of family life for the greater interest of the society and the higher aspirations for a spiritual life, a premise that is tantamount to a married man's abdication of family responsibility for reaching the state of detachment. Gitali's story strikes at the flawed classification of public duty from private duty, the former an exclusive zone for the male and the latter, considered least important, meant for the female sex. The story sketches out the difficult role played by Gopa, Buddha's wife, in maintaining a peaceful domestic life that made Buddha's ascetic life and their son Rahul's childhood upbringing possible. On his return after a period of long absence, Buddha has brought in another threat to Gopa's life: the sad prospect of losing her son to the ascetic ideals of Buddha! Gopa has seen a dark future looming large in her future; Buddha would regale in his ascetic life at the cost of his wife's sacrifices and she will have to remain a mute spectator. Buddha's dedication to the higher cause of spiritual life would not perhaps been possible without the sacrifices of Gopa at home and of another woman Sujata

who took care of Buddha's daily needs in the hermitage. In the African cultural tradition, the image of the flying male is patronised as the epitome of the native people's power of unrestricted liberty against racial dominance. It was against this eulogy of male tradition that Toni Morrison registers her note of dissent in her writings by pointing out that it fails to do justice to the demands of family life, which the African women have to meet all alone. Gitali's story, in a similar vein, dismantles the cherished tradition of patronising the ascetic life of the Indian male at the cost of women's dream of happiness within the boundaries of domesticity and reposes upon it values which are denied in the conventional set-up. Gitali has written a story," Urmila: Eta Aa-ramayani Galpa" (Urmila: a non-Ramayani Tale) focussing on the Ramayana character of Urmila. Urmila, Laksman's wife, has been a favourite subject for writers with a critical insight into the life of the epic characters, but Gitali's engagement with the Urmila narrative deserves special attention because she treats all the four characters (Rama, Laksmana, Sita and Urmila) as prospective participants in the secret game of adultery. In Gitali's imagination, Rama was Urmila's man of choice on the day of "swayambara" itself though she had to lose him to Sita, and Laksmana and Sita must have fallen for each other, which accounted for his remaining close to Sita on every occasion. Sita and Urmila are brought out from the ambit of ideal womanhood by showing them as women of flesh and blood in this story.

Manika Devi has to her credit a number of stories, which are woven around mythical or folkloric episodes in order to contextualize them in the cotemporary situations of life. Her story "Aai Mur Mone Kutekutai" (Champawati: an Agonizing Tale of Love) is a rendering of again the story of Champawati from *Grandma's Tales* the focal point of which is the negative role of a cruel and jealous stepmother, a common theme in the folkloric literature all over the world. Manika reconstructs this tale as a narrative of love, intense passion and the anguish of separation by underplaying the motif of jealousy and cruelty. Champawati resigns herself to an uncertain period of agonizing waiting, accepting her separation from her beloved as the inevitable condition of love rather than an individual plight caused by any evil design on the part of any female agency. Although the story does not offer any scope for a reassessment of the power of female characters, rejection of the myth of the eternal fatal female, a folkloric archetype, itself makes a statement about the need to subvert the given stereotypes.

Tracing the trajectory of woman's journey from subordination to self-assertion, repression to resistance, women short story writing supplies a politically resonant space for destabilizing the stereotypical gender-oriented presumptions. Constructing an identity for

woman involves complex processes as our study brings to light how woman has to redefine some given premises like marriage, motherhood, family, female body and beauty etc., and reconstruct her situatedness in the light of some other theses like sisterhood as conducive of more agency and autonomy for woman. Being a favourite genre for the female authors, short story writing itself gives a boost to the feminist drive towards constructing counter narratives, the most significant move in the direction of woman's identity assertion.

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