

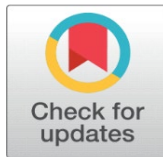
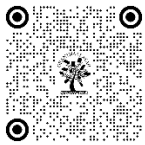


EGALITARIAN NARRATIVES: WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN MUNIN BARUA'S FILMOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

Commercial films in India wield significant influence as a medium of communication. Other than providing entertainment, these films reflect the views of the society. While representation of women in Indian film is dubbed as scarce and superficial, this paper attempts to understand the cinematic representation of violence against women in the select films of Assamese filmmaker Munin Barua. The study employs Altaf Mazid's egalitarianism as the theoretical framework to examine the women characters in Munin Barua's films. The select films were analysed using Braun and Clarke's provided steps, leading to the identification of themes that revolved around women. The findings of the study reveal that women in Barua's films are frequently presented as mere plot devices, conforming to traditional gender roles. The select films of Barua also exhibit an underlying inclination towards portraying women in an egalitarian manner.

Keywords: Representation of Women, Munin Barua, Assamese Film Industry, Egalitarianism

1. INTRODUCTION

Women in Assam and North-East India face a complex web of challenges, including human trafficking, immigration, security, and health issues. They often find themselves trapped amidst the complexities of ethnic conflict, insurgency, and state forces. Furthermore, the state and non-military forces expect women to be 'agents of peace' in the region (Banerjee, 2014). Following the Nirbhaya rape case in December 2012, the issue of violence against women (VAW) sparked a nationwide discourse. In addition, the discussion brought focus to women's mistreatment in the context of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in Northeast India (Banerjee, 2014). But much like the other pressing matters, the women's issues of NE India also remain invisible in the mainstream national media.

Indian films often adhere to traditional gender roles, with male characters playing dominant and central roles. Women's roles are predominantly defined by their involvement in domestic affairs, taking on the responsibility of supporting and attending to their families. As a 'social issue,' women have been present in the films of India from the inception (Butalia, 1984). These mainstream films, often dismissed as escapist or melodramatic, also offer a reflection of established ideas and values. The issues relevant to women typically raised by the directors include "marriage, widowhood, dowry, rape". Most directors perceive "marriage, widowhood, dowry, rape" as the only relevant women's issues to portray in films (Butalia, 1984).

The inaugural Assamese film, *Joymoti* (1935), depicted the narrative of an Ahom princess making the ultimate sacrifice to safeguard the Ahom kingdom. This bears the distinction of the first Indian film to be inspired by an actual event (Mazid, 2006). Since the inception of Assamese films, women characters have consistently occupied prominent roles in the storylines.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Altaf Mazid proposed the theory of egalitarianism to comprehend the practice of filmmaking in Assam. He argued that the Assamese filmmakers place emphasis on traditional values and the idea of an egalitarian society (Mazid, 2013). According to him, if the filmmakers do not highlight this ethos, it could have a detrimental effect on how the audience receives the film. The Assamese society is deeply rooted in tradition, with the family being the focal point of concern. Therefore, the films place a strong emphasis on the subject of family. The strong bond the middle class in Assam has with their ancestral village makes films with similar themes well-received by the audience. It creates a sense of familiarity and connection. According to him, filmmakers in Assam are driven by the audience's belief in an egalitarian society, which leads them to produce simplistic and naïve content that appeals to all members of the family (Mazid, 2013).

The application of Altaf Mazid's egalitarianism theory enables an analysis of the cinematic representation of women in the films of Munin Barua. This theory serves as a valuable tool for examining the representation of traditional beliefs and the treatment of women characters in Assamese films.

2.1. OBJECTIVE

The representation of women in film studies has received inadequate attention, particularly the examination of women's issues in Assamese cinema has been largely overlooked by scholars. Munin Barua is widely regarded as the most commercially successful filmmaker from Assam. The objective of this study is to gain an understanding of the depiction of women in his films.

3. METHODOLOGY

The data used for this analytical research has been gathered from various secondary sources. Furthermore, the author's residency in Assam contributes to bringing his close experience to the study. For the study, the films *Prabhathi Pokhir Gaan*, *Bidhata*, *Kanyadaan*, *Nayak*, *Daag*, *Hiya Diya Niya* and *Dinabandhoo* are selected and analysed to draw a discussion. The selection of films is based on two parameters: the film's availability in the public domain and its popularity within the state. For the identification of themes centred around the women characters, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach is utilised to analyse the select films.

4. MUNIN BARUA AS A FILMMAKER

Munin Barua's extensive filmography is filled with a remarkable number of movies that have achieved commercial success. His films have successfully dispelled the misconception that Assamese films are incapable of achieving box office success. Interestingly enough, he released the films during a period that is widely regarded as the nadir of Assamese cinema. The journey of Munin Barua began as a Mandolin player in Golaghat, Assam. This led to his exposure to the backstage of the theatre. In Golaghat, he became a member of two theatre groups, Mit-Bitan and Trishul. Munin Barua's fascination for the world of theatre deepened under the tutelage of Shivaprasad Thakur. Despite the film Phaguni's failure at the box office, his engagement with it sparked a deep interest in the world of filmmaking. He wrote the screenplay for Bowari, a cinematic adaptation of a story by Basanta Das. Bowari garnered immense success at the regional box office, drawing in large crowds. Pratima, his first film, was a collaborative effort with Nipon Goswami. Munin Barua divided his filmmaking career into two distinct phases: the first phase includes Pratima (1987), Pita Putra (1988), Pahari Kanya (1991), and Prabhat Pakshir Gaan (1992), while the second phase encompasses the rest of his films (Barua, 2017). According to him, the reason behind the divide was the lack of producers during the years 1993-1998. Among the individuals who he said influenced him were Abdul Mazid, Pulak Gogoi, Shivaprasad Thakur, and Nasir Hussain (Barua, 2017).

His films featured regular appearances by actors like Tapan Das, Pranjal Saikia, and Jatin Bora, with Zubeen Garg taking on the responsibility of the music director. In the 2000s-2010, Munin Barua achieved commercial success with films like Hiya Diya Niya, Nayak (2001), Daag (2001), Kanyadaan (2002), Bidhata (2003) Barood (2004), and Rong (2004). His acclaimed work, Dinabandhu (2004), received the national award for the best regional film, solidifying his place in cinema history.

Munin Barua has made an indelible impact on the Assamese film industry, with his repertoire of 14 films as a director and 21 films as a screenwriter. He also directed two soap operas titled Papu-Niku Sangbad and Rudra (Rupaliparda, 2019). Amid a struggling Assamese film industry and the popularity of VCD films, Barua's Hiya Diya Niya (2000) emerged as a game-changer for Assamese cinema and "altered the direction of Assamese cinema" (Baruah, 2022).

5. BRIEF PLOT OF THE SELECT FILM

Prabhati Pokhir Gaan (1992): The club "Seujpur Milan Sangha" provides a space for the youth in the local area. It is the place where the youth come together to share their joys, sorrows, and struggles. The prospect of constructing a super-market in that area has piqued the interest of influential individuals who see great potential for economic growth. The move has sparked protests from the youth.

Hiya Diya Niya (2000): Despite residing in the city of Chicago, Dipen "Dipu" Saikia maintains a deep sense of pride in his identity as the son of a farmer. He holds the aspiration of marrying Momi. Dipu knows that Momi's mother (Runu Hazarika) only wants an Non-Resident Indian (NRI), but he wishes Runu to accept him as a village guy rather than an NRI. By working together with his friends and Momi's father, he formulates a complex scheme to alter Momi and Runu's perspectives. Momi and her mother finally come to a realisation at the end of the film, paving the way for Dipu to marry Momi.

Nayak (2001): The narrative of Nayak is driven by the friendship between Abinash Choudhury and Anupam Duara. Abinash treats the Duara family as if they

were his own flesh and blood. When he asks Barasha to marry him, he discovers about her romantic involvement with Anupam. Rather than experiencing negative emotions, he finds joy in the information and assures her that he is willing to make extreme sacrifices for the pair's happiness. With Abinash's assistance, Anupam establishes a company and later ties the knot with Barasha. Driven by desperation for success, Anupam forms an alliance with corrupt individuals, straining his friendship with Abinash. In order to prevent Anupam from going to jail, Abinash selflessly shoulders the entire blame. The film reaches its climax with the arrest of Anupam's corrupt business partner, leading to a heartwarming reunion.

Daag (2001): The plot of the story revolves around two Brauah brothers who find themselves enamoured with the same girl. Driven by a twisted desire to win affection from the girl, Rohit Baruah, the elder brother, plots to kill his younger brother, Rahul Baruah. However, Rahul defies death and escapes the attempt on his life. Ultimately, the younger brother appears and reveals the complete truth.

Kanyadan (2002): The Baruah family, residing in Bokulpur, is a close-knit joint family. There are four brothers, three of whom are married, while the youngest brother, Utpal Boruah, is romantically involved with a girl (Reema). Utpal finds his employment in a company, and soon discovers that the owner of the company is none other than Reema's father. The latter was initially against the idea of his daughter marrying Utpal. However, he proposed a condition - if he were to marry Rima, he would have to reside at Reema's home, away from his joint family. Finally, Reema departs with Utpal and arrives at Utpal's residence. The father comes to the realization of his mistake and embraces them.

Bidhata (2003): The Baruah family is regarded as an aristocratic family, given their lineage as descendants of Raichoudhury, a landed aristocrat during the British period. The film centres on the honour of the Baruah family and explores the conflicts arising from their adherence to tradition. At that point, Bijoy 'Biju' Choudhury, the nephew of Rudra Prasad Baruah, comes forward to reconcile the entire family. Concealing his cancer diagnosis, Biju silently fights his illness. As his life nears its end, he yearns to witness his fragmented family uniting once more.

Dinabandhoo (2004): Dinabandhoo Das leads a simple life as an honest accountant in a government office. Tragically, his spouse passed away, leaving behind two young daughters for him to raise. He cared for the daughters, always going above and beyond to ensure their well-being. Rani's marriage drained him of whatever he had left as he gave away his entire savings as dowry. Despite his efforts to preserve his self-respect, he ended up forfeiting everything he valued.

6. FINDINGS

Following a thorough analysis of the films, several themes revolving around the female characters were identified. Those themes are responsibilities of a spouse, transition from girlhood to daughter-in-law, the mothers, marriage and dowry. The themes are discussed below.

6.1. RESPONSIBILITIES OF A SPOUSE

In his films, Munin Barua gave considerable importance to the theme of marriage and the expected obligations of a spouse, specifically within the framework of a husband and the extended family. In *Daag* Rahul says to his elder brother Rohit, "A spouse is essential for sharing one's troubles. You should get married". His film proposes that the spouse can act as a remedy to steer a man away

from the path of wrongdoing. In the film *Bidhata*, upon Biju's suspect of Diganta's involvement in illicit activities, he says "Aunty, do one thing, get him married." In *Bidhata*, the film examines the common tendency to assign blame to one's wife when faced with unexpected circumstances. Upon learning that his son has made a donation of land for the community union, Rudra Baruah reacted as, "No, he cannot think of this on his own. Someone (his spouse) must have incited him". This is also demonstrated in the film *Dinabandhoo*, when Ramesh challenges his father's intention to demand dowry, to which his father reacts, "Has she (fiancée) already gained control over you?"

6.2. TRANSITION FROM GIRLHOOD TO DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

In the films of Munin Barua, the transition from girlhood to bowari (daughter-in-law) is an important aspect. In *Bidhata* Biju says "After taking sindoor in the hairline and taking Oroni (veil), the girl changes (to daughter-in-law)". The protagonist Utpal Baruah in the film *Kanyadaan* displays a 'humorous' form of teasing as he playfully attempts to impress Rima. In this scene, Utpal inquires about Rima's name, and upon receiving her full name, he responds, "No, there is no necessity to reveal your surname. Surnames of girls are not permanent anyway." In the film *Nayak*, referring to Barasha going out to travel with her friends, Barasha's mother tells her partner, "She has grown into a young woman. If we do not get strict now, there is no telling of what kind of trouble she will cause in her future in-law's place." This sense of one getting prepared before marriage can also be sensed in a scene from *Dinabandhoo*. Following the marriage of *Dinabandhoo*, his partner Savitri showed reverence to the elders. One of the elders says while leaving, "I look forward to the day when I can taste your dishes and see how your mother's training has shaped your culinary abilities."

The mothers:

The mothers depicted in Munin Barua's films exude a tender, benevolent, and untainted aura. Their days are filled with a constant balance between tending to household duties and prioritising their children's wellbeing. Mothers in Munin Barua's film also show the consistent tendency to think about their children's ability to find a suitable partner. The topics of their conversations with nearby women primarily revolve around their children's undertakings and marriage. Moreover, they are the one who take on the responsibility of being the peacemaker within the family, always striving to resolve any disagreements.

Marriage and Dowry:

The portrayal of marriage holds significant importance in Munin Barua's films. In the event that the protagonist is financially disadvantaged, addressing the marriage of sisters and daughters becomes a complex matter due to resource constraints. After the discussion, the protagonist overwhelms with anguish and concern, and struggles to arrange for the marriage. The pattern is evident in the films *Prabhati Pokhir Gaan* and *Dinabandhoo*. On the flip side, when the protagonist is wealthy, the discussions become lively and with playful.

The topic of dowry is a central aspect to Barua's film, *Dinabandhoo*. In the film, he explores the potential emotions of inadequacy felt by a newly married girl from a poor family when marrying into a wealthy family, highlighting this through a conversation between Bani and Bipul. Bani asks Bipul, "It is indeed a fact that a newly married girl cannot go to a wealthy family empty-handed. She will be unable to find solace within herself. She would always have to keep her head low, wouldn't she?"

7. DISCUSSION

In Indian cinema, women's roles are categorised into positive and negative characters. Good women fulfil the roles of self-sacrificing mothers, dutiful daughters, loyal sisters, and obedient wives. They offer their men unconditional support and comfort, rarely questioning their actions. Their purity and naivety are portrayed to depict them as strong (Butalia, 1984). This is present when Munin Barua draws a contrast between a "village mother" and an "City mother", as well as a "city girl" and a "village/non-city girl". The "village mother" is characterised by her innocence, kindness, empathy, selflessness, and unquestioning nature. Her life is filled up with responsibilities of the household and caring for her children. She is a righteous figure with the job to restore equilibrium within the family. And the "City mother" is complex and portrayed as the party-loving, card-playing, and kitty party-attending mother. She creates conflict and questions decisions of her spouse. Her behaviour appears to be impolite and exhibit a dislike towards individuals of low socioeconomic status. The "city girl" is characterised by her stubbornness, immaturity, penchant for partying. Around boys, she carries herself with a bold demeanour. A "village/non-city girl" is untouched by city life, shows innocence, naivety, and a caring nature as she prepares herself for marriage. With utmost care, she tends to her parents' needs, providing them with assistance. While a "city girl" is demanding and assertive, a "village/non-city girl" is playful and exudes a child-like behaviour. But both foreign-return characters (Manashi in *Prabhati Pokhir Gaan* and Sunita in *Hiya Diya Niya*) display a sense of discipline, confidence, and a commitment to their traditional values.

In Munin Barua's films, marriage is the wheel to the flow of the storyline. However, the female characters are frequently relegated to the role of plot devices, lacking agency and existing solely to create tension and advance the story. The filmmaker frequently incorporates the idea of 'happily ever after' into their work, adding a touch of optimism and idealism.

The portrayal of marrying off daughter to a "good family" (read as high social class and wealthy) in order to uphold and enhance the family's status is also evident in his films. This concept is explored in films like *Kanyadaan*, *Hiya Diya Niya*, *Nayak*, while the contrary is depicted in the film *Dinabandhoo*.

His film bore the influence of theatre, both in its story and direction (Mena 58). The dialogues of his screenplay followed puritan Assamese. In the films of Munin Barua, there are a few actors that are recurring. Among them Jatin Bora, Tapan Das, Pranjal Saikia, Arun Nath, Mridula Barua, Manjula Baruah, Purabi Sarma, Hiranya Deka are significant. Jatin Bora, Tapan Das, and Pranjal Saikia were often chosen by Barua to play the lead roles in his films. While portraying the roles of their characters and delivering their lines, Tapan Das, Jatin Bora, Pranjal Saikia and Arun Nath brought about a theatrical ambiance in their performances. Mridula Baruah's acting in all her films is characterised by a consistent expression, which she compensates for with her skilled dialogue delivery and innocent facial expressions (Das, 2023). Purabi Sarma portrayed the roles of the responsible elder sister or supportive sister-in-law, while Manjula Baruah's depictions of motherhood often went unnoticed, overshadowed by other aspects of the story.

The literature regarding the status of women reveals a bleak situation for women in Assam. However, Munin Barua's films steer away from conflict and instead focus on portraying women in an egalitarian manner. The villages he creates are a harmonious blend of greenery and beauty, where innocence and happiness thrive. In the films, the village is portrayed as the custodian of traditional beliefs.

Munin Barua's films do not challenge societal issues; instead, they romanticise and evoke an aura of exoticism around the villages of Assam. This is exemplified by the realisation of "city girl" who become influenced by rural life, leading to a transformation in their behaviour towards traditional values. Following that, they make their way back to the village or come to appreciate the "beauty" of the village. Barua's films often delve into the traditional importance of marriage and the role of an ideal bowari (daughter-in-law). Mothers, with their calming presence, create an atmosphere of peace and stability within the family, while wives are expected to attend to the needs of their husbands and children selflessly, without raising any questions. The films also emphasise the significance of tradition among the old aristocracy, with Lalit Baruah (Daag) and Rudra Pratap Baruah (Bidhata) serving as notable representatives. Through his efforts, Munin Barua managed to attract a large audience to the cinema hall, where he presented an Assamese society founded on egalitarianism.

8. CONCLUSION

Our understanding of masculinity and femininity is not only influenced by the family, peer group, and school, but the mass media also plays a significant role in shaping these notions (Levy, 1990). In many films, as the scenes of violence against women unfold, a palpable sense of sadness fills the air, only to be shattered by the protagonist's breathtaking gravity-defying action sequence, portrayed in slow-moving frames. To provide an instance, the Assamese film *Raghupati* (2023), which has gained much commercial success, showcases the protagonist's sister enduring a violent assault and fatal outcome, thus inciting a strong thirst for retribution within the protagonist. Unleashing a series of deadly attacks, he mercilessly takes down the antagonist. With the antagonist defeated, the protagonist rejoices by dancing in a jubilant song. The devastating circumstances of his sister's rape and death were not only simplified but also conveniently ignored, as if removing the culprit would somehow address the larger issue at hand.

In the film *Dr Bezbarua*, the nefarious Dr Bezbarua traps the female protagonist in his chamber and proceeds menacingly towards her. Driven by a desire to preserve her 'honour,' the female protagonist contemplates using a razor to end her life. With this scene, Brajen Baruah, the director of the film, exhibited this to evoke fantasies of rape in the audience, while simultaneously highlighting the "Assamese women's utopian cause for her chastity" (Mazid, 2013). In the film *Prabhati Pokhir Gaan*, the theme of chastity was subtly portrayed when Prakash angrily interrogates his sister Pratima about the source of money used to care for their father and provide good food.

Assamese filmmakers drive to showcase the Assamese society in an egalitarian manner has effectively silenced many prevalent social issues. The filmmakers in Assam are effectively addressing the local issues of the region by leveraging online platforms and technological advancements. Though there is an anticipation for a more thorough scrutiny of the complexities associated with women's issues in the near future.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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