

Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Burhi Aair Xadhu*: Musings on the Metaphorical Meanings and Allegorical Representations of the Text

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Abstract

Folklore refers to an exclusive way of life which encompasses the histories, cultures and traditions of human societies such as the customs, rites and rituals; legends, myths and tales; riddles, proverbs and superstitions; local beliefs, divinations and magical practices; music, arts, and crafts; games, festivals and pastimes among various other such common practices. Above all, folklore reflects a distinct collective (folk) consciousness of various human societies that organises itself in distinct clusters of groups and communities. Down the ages and across the world, the travelling and transforming oral traditions of 'fables' and 'folk tales' has continued to retain a holistic expression, as well as, a significant reflection of cultural life defining various human societies, thereby, transforming across space and time.

Infused with the agility of the human imagination, the commonality of human experiences and acting as influential carriers of moral instructions and worldly wisdom, both fables and folk tales continue to be churned in the interesting cyclical variations of human narration. Indian fables and folktales which can be traced to the *Upanishads*, the *Mahabharata*, *Jatak Mata*, *Hitopadesha* and *Panchatantra* among other such major works comprising such stories are indeed rich and varied in nature. Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1868-1938), the stalwart of Assamese literature had made a significant literary contribution in compiling and retelling Assamese fables and folk tales in the genre of Children's Literature as noted in his collections such as *Junaki*, *Burhi Aair Xadhu*, *Kokadenta Aru Naati Lora* and *Baakhor*.

The paper is an attempt to derive a more meaningful reading and extract a set of interpretation of the most popular Assamese fables and folk tales, with special reference to the timeless stories of *Burhi Aair Xadhu*. Thus, the paper highlights some of the woven metaphors and allegories in the text which encapsulates certain social problems and practices, morals and messages that are also universal in nature. Through a close reading of the text, it aims to gain an insight into the likely meanings and symbolical

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representations in the fables and folktales of *Burhi Aair Xadhu* from which generations of Assamese children, have derived the joys of imagination along with the necessary moral instruction and to which the young, as well as, the aged have nostalgically continued to retrace their roots of childhood.

Key words: Grandmother's tales, Indian fables and folk tales, Metaphorical meaning, Symbolic ideas, Women and story-telling, Woven allegories.

1.0 Introduction

Indian folklore is undoubtedly enriched with its intensive derivation from all the ancient Indian literatures including the regional literatures of India. Thus, the land of India with its fascinating repertoire of stories is considered as an ancient treasure house of both fables and folk tales. In this regard, K. D. Upadhyaya (1961) in "A General Survey of Indian Folktales" discusses at length on how India occupies a significant place in the history of world folklores" as well. They are also considered as an original source of the Greek *Aesop's Fables* among other such western adaptations of Indian folklores. Significantly, W. Norman Brown in his "The Modern Indian Folklore" provides a list of the publications of Indian folk tales such as G. H. Damant's *Indian Antiquary* (1871) which comprises folktales from Bengal or other important publications like H. Parker's third and final volume of the *Village Folk-Tales of Ceylon* (1914) among several others.

The *Panchatantra* originally prepared to instruct royal princes in the ancient times, stands as the primary source of Indian fables in which birds and beasts function as bearers of instruction in diplomacy, practical conduct and worldly wisdom. According to Upadhyaya, the 'fable' form derives its relevance from the disciplines of the 'Nitishastra' and the 'Arthashastra' which instructs man on politics and practicalities of day-to-day life. Also, the great Indian epic *Mahabharata* contains fables particularly in the didactic book XII and the *Upanishads*. He also mentions that the Buddhist *Jatak Mata* tales contain Lord Buddha's enlightening wisdom and the knowledge associated with His re-incarnations, contained in the form of fables in which talking animals narrate the stories. Upadhyaya while referring to the function of didactic fable as "inculcating useful knowledge" also opines that it reflects "a certain kinship between man and animals" and in no way intends "to merely extol cleverness without regard to morality" (p.182). The ancient fable form was rendered in the prose form but the 'morals' were particularly sung in the form of verses. V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar in his "Migration of Legends:

A Study in Indian Folklore and Tradition” notes that it was the Indian tales that had orally travelled to Tibet and were later adapted and published as *Tibetan Tales*.

Further, Upadhyaya notes that there are various derived versions of the *Panchatantra* itself such as the lost Pahlavi version dating back to A.D. 570, the Arabic and Syrian versions, the two Kashmiri versions and the north-west Indian version, the two revised Jain versions and the Nepalese *Panchatantra*. The *Hitopadesha* composed in the 14th century by Narayana Pandit to tutor the princess daughter of the King of Bengal, Dhavalchandra consisted of Sanskrit fables. The lost work of *The Brihatkatha* was considered an excellent source of Indian folktales which was composed by King Hala’s court poet Gunadhya. The *Katbasarit Sagar* or “Ocean of the Rivers of Stories” (Upadhyaya, p. 185) in Sanskrit was composed between the years 1063 to 1081 by a Brahman, Somadeva with the intention of appeasing the troubled princess of Jalandhar. It is interesting to note that the volume also consisted a compilation of 24,000 slokas. Further, the *Vaital Panchavinsatika* was composed by Shivadas and consisted 25 stories of King Vikramaditya that have long been popular among the Indian masses.

Among the publications on the folktales of Assam, the folktales of the Angami Nagas of Assam by J. H. Hutton, the Kachari folktales by J. D. Anderson, Assamese compilations by S. C. Das and A. Das find a mention in Upadhyaya’s brief survey. One receives a reflection of the enriched folk culture and social history of the Assamese people through these fables and folktales which have travelled down the ages.

2.0 Timeless Tales of Burhi Aair Xadhu (Grandmother’s Tales)

The folk tales of *Burhi Aair Xadhu*, timeless in its appeal translated by Deepika Phukan in English titled *Grandmother’s Tales* contains the following listed thirty tales with interesting titles: “A Twist in The Cat’s Tail” (*Mekurir Jiyekor Sadhu*), “The Monkey and the Fox” (*Baandor Aru Hiyal*), “The Raven and the Warbler” (*Dhurakavuri Aru Tiposi Soraal*), “The Cunning Fox” (*Budhiyok Hiyal*), “The Tiger and the Crab” (*Bagh Aru Kekura*), “The Fox and the Old Couple” (*Burba, Burbi Aru Hiyal*), “The Tale of a Frog” (*Bhekulir Xadhu*), “A Fishy Tale” (*Eta Hinghora Maasor Kotha*), “Gongatop” (based on the Globe Fish), “Dighol Thengia”, “The Kite’s Daughter” (*Siloni Jiyekor Xadhu*), “The Princess in the Elephant Apple” (*Ou Kuwori*), “The Flower Girl” (*Ejoni Malini Aru Ejuja Pbul*), “Tejimola”, “The Youngest Son” (*Nomoliya Pu*), “The Strong Man” (*Eta Boli Manuh*), “Tula

and Teja" (*Tula Aru Teja*), "Panesoi", "Kanchani", "The Know-All" (*Xorobjaan*), "Unscrupulous Thief" (*Kota Juwa Naak Kharoni Di Dhak*), "Tikhor and Sooti Bai" (*Tikhor Aru Sooti Bai*), "Champawati", "King Jaradgav" (*JaradgavRojar Upakhyan*), "The Son in Law's Tale" (*Jumair Sadhu*), "Kukurikona", "His Father's Friend" (*Tawojyekor Sadhu*), "Lotkon", "The Lakshmi in the Family" (*Lakbimi Tiruta*) and "The Two Crafty Lads" (*Dui Budhiyok*).

The present paper thus, attempts to highlight 'Sahityarathi' Lakshminath Bezbaroa's significant contribution and compilation in the memorable telling and re-telling of these timeless Assamese folktales. A leading stalwart in the world of Assamese literature, Bezbaroa (1868-1938) was a prominent intellectual, a poet, writer, biographer, journalist and essayist of the *Jonaki* era. His literary contributions have significantly contributed to the development and promotion of modern Assamese literature. In his preface to the collection of folktales *Burhi Aair Xadhu*, Bezbaroa highlights the presence of a universal appeal while also tracing fine similarities in the treasures of fables and folk tales across the world and emphasising on how language and folklore significantly form the roots of a people.

In this amusing collection of Assamese fables and folk tales, one shall find a world in which the freedom of imagination makes anything possible; where a baby is born from an elephant apple (*outenga*), a girl hatches from an egg, a cat gives birth to daughters, a water-princess conjures rice pudding (*paraman*) out of the blue, a water prince emanates from the heart of rivers, a toiling crab tills the land for agrarian produce, where buffaloes are efficient spies, ladder of tigers are formed, deep wetlands become the gossip corners for fishes, a deity happens to appear in the guise of a python or even the dead are instantly restored to life. The unexpected twists in the narratives filled with incantations and spells, deceptions and disguises, as well as, the variety of representative characters such as the foolish kings and clever thieves, talking animals and tricky birds, innocent brides and wicked stepmothers, deceptive beggar-women and fortune-tellers to mention a few, make these fables and folk tales all the livelier and interesting. These captivating narratives with the combination of oral (re-)tellings and illustrations, continue to capture the imagination of children who are generally at the receiving end.

Fables and folk tales lend themselves to countless possibilities of renderings and retellings and the paper only attempts to explore a set of possible meanings from the primary text thereby further encouraging newer readings and interpretations of these tales. It thus, attempts to derive a more meaningful reading

of the Assamese fables and folktales, with special reference to *Burbi Aair Xadbu* and thereby to identify and unravel the extensions of the woven metaphors and allegories in the text, in order to extract a set of metaphorical meanings and symbolical representations at work.

3.0 The Functions of Metaphor and Allegory

Arthur L. Campa in “Folklore and History” discusses the ways in which folklore shares a kinship to history but also varies in its form of multiple variants, with the freedom of exercising subjective discretion in rendering them, devoid of any such serialisation of events as in history and in a continual process of “embellishing the facts with imagination” (p. 3). With reference to metaphors, Eva Feder Kittay discusses on how the functionality of metaphors can be “transcultural and transhistorical” (p. 63). She thus notes that they are “best understood if we regard metaphorical transfer of meaning as a transfer of the relations of contrast and affinity which pertain to the vehicle term in the domain of the topic” (p. 65). In the significant discourse of metaphors, I. A. Richards in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1938) made use of the terms ‘tenor’ and ‘vehicle’ which when put together create a metaphor. According to Richards, while ‘tenor’ functions as the subject to which meaning is applied, the ‘vehicle’ functions as the carrier of the implied allusion or the suggested meaning which as a result conveys the metaphorical idea. Later the same set of terms were replaced with the terms used by Max Black’s i.e., ‘frame’ and ‘focus’ in his essay “Metaphor” (1954). Terms such as ‘ground’ and ‘figure’ have also been in common usage and similarly in the field of Cognitive Linguistics the terms ‘target’ and ‘source’ are used with reference to representations of metaphors. Further, Lakoff and Turner in *More Than Cool Reason* (1989) discuss the ways in which metaphors are used “unconsciously and automatically” in our day-to-day lives like an ordinary tool to express our thoughts meaningfully and how “metaphor suffuses our thoughts, no matter what we are thinking about” (p. xi).

The form of ‘allegory’ on the other hand can be interpreted as an extended metaphor which attempts to read the symbolic significance of a text that is hidden under the surface or the literal meaning of a text. Morton W. Bloomfield in “Allegory as Interpretation” points out that allegory serves or rather adds a significance to literary representations stating that “[t]he only stable element in a literary work is its words, which, if we know the language in which it is written, have a meaning.

The significance of that meaning is what may be called allegory” (p. 301). Bloomfield further adds that both the works of allegory and symbolical works “possess a level of significance” (p. 305) which require a depth of interpretation. He also notes the tendency of a reoccurrence of associations such as ‘signs and symbols’, ‘icons and images’, ‘myths and emblems’ in relation to allegory. Also, there are various literary devices like similes, puns, catachresis, parables etc. which although are extended forms of metaphors bear subtle differences from the figure of metaphor.

3.1 *Metaphorical and Allegorical Representations in Grandmother's Tales*

In the opening tale of *Burbi Aair Xadbu* or *Grandmother's Tales*, “A Twist in the Cat's Tail” one finds that in accordance to the feline mother's truth a “bowl of milk takes the hue of inky herbs” (*Grandma's Tales*, 2) and the basil plant withers indicating her strange untimely death to her immediate daughters. Both the symbols of ‘milk’ and the ‘basil plant’ (also revered as *Tulsi-Maa* in the Hindu household) commonly suggest an allusion to a ‘mother’ who is the source of life but as represented in the story, such a life-source is ruthlessly cut short. The Cat's daughter is compelled to part with her ‘ring’ to the water-prince emanating from the heart of the river, which can be read as a metaphor of barter for ‘freedom of choice’ from the clutches of a male figure who later when she returns to, to request for her ring, eventually abducts her. In this story, the merchant's wife, her sister is labelled as a harbinger of bad luck for no fault of hers and is compelled to live in a small hut situated at the backyard of the merchant's house, all because of her (supposed) inability to give birth. This could also be read as a metaphor of the compulsive and performative obligations of a woman in a family and society, failing which her fate is sealed and is thereby confined to the humiliating margins as is still prevalent in our society today.

The stories present the different nature and attributes of both men and women alike and it is seen that the fables through the human-like, talking animals and birds represent facets of human nature as well. In the tale “Monkey and the Fox”, the plotting monkey cheats not only the passerby but also his fox-friend with whom he subtly breaks his previous agreement of sharing their collective loot. Instead, the monkey relaxing on a tree drops down ‘banana peels’ one by one in jest on his friend, thereby enjoying the (literal and the symbolic) fruits of his clever tricks which also suggests how trust in the wrong fellow can prove to be futile and ‘slippery’. The cheating monkey showers the chewed and ‘wasted

fibers' of sugarcane on his fox-friend which symbolises the 'wasted efforts' of the fox who is thoroughly duped and in fact, the monkey does not stop at that. To add to the insult, having licked the last drop of milk, the monkey also drops an empty cylinder and an earthen jar on the fox's head, which implies shattering of his hopes with the fatal blow of a tragic fate. The tale thus, cautions one to steer clear of evil intentions and to always be mindful of the company one keeps.

Then, in the tale "The Princess in the Elephant Apple" the elephant-apple princess (*ou-kuwori*) whose fruit shell is burnt can be read as a metaphor of dislodging the hiding princess from the given confines and ideals of femininity, as well as, the cocooned life that she is born into. Similarly, in "A Fishy Tale" the wife burns her husband's fish-scale covering and the fish, her husband turns into a man forever; the 'fish' image here symbolically represents a certain virility. In the two tales "Raven and Warbler" and "The Flower Girl" one can trace the inter-dependence and inter-relation in life, in each and everything around us which we often tend to overlook in the presumed ordinariness of our lives. These tales also indicate a certain kinship of man and nature at various levels. The tale "Dighol Thengia" is an allegory of the 'man-animal conflict', each fearing the other and each of the species humiliating the other, time and again. "Gongatop" or the globe fish is an allegory centered on the old proverb 'pride goes before a fall'. In the tale, the globe fish, who presides over the assembly of fishes meets his end when on hearing his aunt's praises for him, he swells up with pride to the extent that his otherwise agile tummy bursts open, thereby symbolically emphasising the value of humility in the fable. In the tale of "The Strong Man", the protagonist fools and ties up an innocent tiger who eagerly desires to learn singing from him. However, the man in a bid to prove himself strong, thrashes and pounds the tiger to death which can be read as an allegory of man's cruelty, as well as, man's insentient nature towards animals.

Now, if the greedy tiger in "Tikhori and Sooti Bai" who is pounded in the *dheki* amuses children, the tale of a young girl of ten, 'Tejimola' moves little children to tears when both her hands and limbs are grounded in that same traditional rice pounding tool, the *dheki*. Tejimola succumbs to her injuries and dies a victim of her wicked step-mother's torture. Her gravely wounded hands and limbs can be read as the girl's utter helplessness and finally her pounded head as the ultimate extent of torture. The *dheki* (read: metaphor) in the story then becomes an instrument of executing a wicked step-mother's grudges on an

innocent child, the hidden 'embers' in Tejimola's dress for the wedding as an extension of her acute envy and the hidden 'mouse' in the same dress, an expression of her cruel intentions of embarrassing Tejimola at a ceremonial gathering, symbolically shredding her dignity into pieces.

In the latter part of the story, growing from the burial site, the 'gourd creeper plant' crawling to the roof of the pound-shed may be read as a symbolic metaphor of Tejimola's longing for and attachment to her paternal home even as her life is cut short under tragic circumstances. It grows as a sign of the presence of her spirit. Her turning into the *jora tenga* or 'citrus plant' bowing with the weight of juicy lemons, stands as an extension of her inherent resilience. The 'thorns' of the citrus plant could also symbolise her 'adaptation' to her step-mother's cruelty and a 'warning' or even her 'self-defense' against her step-mother's evil ways. Finally, when all traces of her presence is completely uprooted, Tejimola, the citrus plant is thrown into the river. However, she once again transforms into a 'lotus flower'; here the lotus again symbolises perseverance in the face of all odds as the lotus bears quality of blooming bright even in the mud that tries to weigh it down. The tale can thus be read as an allegory of many a girl child and such women in the society who are silenced into bearing tortures at all levels even in their homes and are compelled into victimhood. At the same time, it also leaves an optimistic message of the power of silent resilience and the silent resistance of an undying spirit. Tejimola in the form of a lotus sings to her merchant father returning home knowing that only he could provide her justice singing, "Stretch not your arms, Pluck not this flower, Beloved father mine, My stepmother crushed me for ruining her silk, I was Tejimola at one time" (*Grandma's Tales*, p. 53).

"The Kite's Daughter" is the tale of an abandoned girl child brought up in the comfort of a kite's nest and it is again a metaphor of displacement. The girl's seven-arms-long strand of hair indicates her desirable beauty, yet again functioning as a metaphor. The kind-hearted "Kite-Maa" who had brought up the child and had assisted her through every passage of rites dutifully is thrashed and buried "beneath the pile of cow-dung" (*Grandma's Tales*, p. 90) which symbolically suggests cruelty and dishonour to the dead mother. The Kite's daughter is reduced to being an object of barter by the wicked co-wives but in the course of time when their husband discovers the truth and only when justice is met, she is restored to a free life from the confines of the box. The cruel wives are thus, put to a self-test

of crossing a string across a pit of spikes without having it snapped in order to prove their innocence but when each of their attempts fail, one by one the wives meet their painful death, symbolically suggesting that when truth snaps, one is completely ensnared and that in the end justice prevails. Here, it can be said that the cruelty of selling off the Kite's daughter by the jealous co-wives to the sailing trader simply for his fanciful wares is suggestive of the 'commodification' or even the 'objectification' of a woman. Also, metaphorically, the story is not without its share of 'competition' in which the performing skills of the Kite's daughter are put to test, as well as, the weaving skills of each of the co-wives to prove themselves as their husband's pride.

The heart-touching tale of "Tula and Teja" is an allegory of a mother's undying love for her children despite all odds. In the story, the edge of a short 'bamboo ledge' extending into a pond from which the young wife or the step mother of the young children (Teja and Tula) secretly pushes their mother, symbolically represents the ruthlessness of a woman at the 'brink' of revenge. Again, the *dalim* or 'pomegranate plant' given to the King by a brother promising his sister's hand in marriage symbolises love and commitment. Later on, when the 'paternal possessions' follow Teja in a strange manner, while she leaves her paternal home can be read as a metaphor of a home drained of its wealth, prosperity and peace when the Lakshmi of the household (as the Hindu belief goes) leaves her home in unhappiness or is treated cruelly at her paternal home. Similarly, in the story "The Lakshmi in the Family" when a woman of the household is abducted, a series of misfortunes in the form of several deaths and huge losses befall in the family.

"Tejimola" and "Tula and Teja" are two such examples that may also be read as allegories of how women themselves are represented as the enemies of their own kind or also as allegories of 'choice' in which the victims are to prove themselves by making the correct choices which are symbolic in themselves i.e., the hand-folded choices of chewed betel and sweet *ladoo* in "Tejimola" and hunger and thirst *ladoo* in "Tula and Teja". Similarly, in the tale "Kanchani" when the flames of a loving couple swirl in a "single flame soaring high" and the branches from the trees planted on their cremation places "extend from both sides and me[e]t at the middle of the river" (*Grandma's Tales*, p. 172) it can be read as a metaphor of transcendence, of two souls meeting in the afterworld, as well as, a metaphor of undying love and devotion.

While the tale of “Panesoi” is about a woman who hatches from an egg and is displaced from its confines to a ‘tree stump’ by the river bank but is given a place in the shelter in the end; “Champawati” is a tale of a python-husband (who is actually a deity) under a spell of a demon-mother and can be read as an allegory of a step-mother’s greed which results in a great personal loss. Among others, ‘women’ represented across these tales can also be read as significant metaphors in the guise of animal or bird-mothers, step-mothers, co-wives, barren mothers, cannibal and demon mothers, beggar women, princesses, daughters, old women, women as Lakshmi of the house, women as victims and women pushed to the margins. Significantly, Charles Francis Potter (see “Definitions of Folklore”) in his description of the term folklore significantly notes the role of women in story-telling in the following words:

[t]here is also, beside the juvenile, a strong feminine element in folklore, because its origin antedates the emergence of reason and belongs in the instinctive and intuitional areas. It is the irrational and highly imaginative: much of it is termed “old wives tales”. Women have always been the savers and conservators of beliefs, rites, superstitions, rituals and customs.] (p. 267).

Also the play of names and words in the tales like “The Youngest Son” based on the old man who loses track of the decided name of his new born son on the way and “The Know All” in which a play of words saves the life of *xorobjaan* or the Know-all, symbolically represents the playful nature of words and how words play themselves at unexpected moments.

4.0 Concluding Note

The folk tales in this collection reflect a link of man-animal, man-nature and man-supernatural world existing in a close kinship and also at times reflecting ambivalent relations. At times, non-naturalistic or supernatural elements blend into the tales such as the occurrence of deceptive disguises of man, his transformations into birds, animals, plants or objects and at times vice versa, as well as, his transcendence to and fro the real and the afterworld, indeed make an interesting reading. This is only one way of reading the enriching folktales and they lend themselves to newer meanings and variations each time they are told and retold, read and re-interpreted.

The process of creative remembrance and renderings of folklores are in a creative continuation today and in the words of B. A Bodkin “folk memory forges

as much as it retains and restricts and corrupts as much as it transmits and improves” (Definitions of Folklore, p. 256). Bloomfield (1972) opines that “[t]rue literary scholarship aims at making literature of the past continuously relevant either by establishing its original significance or its modern significance” (p. 302). In “Folklore’s Crisis”, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes in the words of Robert Thompson (p. 296) that in the absence of inter or intra personal communications the “word-of-mouth folk culture” may suffer a threat from the “word-of-modern folk culture”. However, while our rich folklores still continue to capture and shape the receptive intelligence and imagination of children, the nostalgia and longing for a purer past be it in the form of one’s childhood or a primitive way of life attests the significance or even relevance of folklores for both children and adults alike. Thus, in a closing note, the paper puts forth a rhetorical verse in the words of the amiable *Burbi Aai* or Grandma: “The owl has settled on the roof, Of my story there is no proof, The betel nuts spathe I can see, But where will all of you be?” (*Grandma’s Tales*, p. 78)

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