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GENDER ROLES AND PATRIARCHAL IDEOLOGY IN LAKSHMINÃTH BEZBAROÃ'S ASSAMESE FOLKTALE TEJEEMOLÃ: A FEMINIST READING THROUGH SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S *THE SECOND SEX*

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the renowned Assamese folk tale "Tejeemolã" by Lakshminãth Bezbaroã through the philosophical framework of Simone de Beauvoir. In her seminal work The Second Sex, Beauvoir asserts that society categorizes men as the "Subject" which views them as agents of their own destiny, while it relegates women to the position of the "Other," as existing primarily in relation to men. The analysis highlights how Tejeemolã is consistently denied individuality, that she is defined solely by her roles as a daughter or stepdaughter. The incident where her stepmother kills her using a rice pounder (dhekee), serves as a metaphor for the oppressive force of patriarchal norms, which destroy a woman's sovereignty and obstructs her capacity for action. Even in her reappearance as elements of nature, such as plants or flowers, Tejeemolã remains passive and incapable of influencing her own fate. The paper concludes that Tejeemolã's eventual restoration to human form is entirely dependent on her father's intervention, which informs of her lack of agency over her own identity. Through a close reading of this folk tale, the study reveals how traditional narratives can subtly reinforce societal expectations for women to embody passivity as well as dependence on male authority.
KEYWORDS: *Assamese folk tales, Identity, Lakshminãth Bezbaroã, Patriarchy, Simone de Beauvoir, Tejeemolã, The Other, Women.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, first published in French as *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1949 and translated into English in 1953, remains one of the most influential and groundbreaking works in feminist thought. In it the author's arguments incorporate ideas in philosophy, history and sociology and she seriously examines how women were treated in the society. Beauvoir explores how these conditions have been shaped, perpetuated, and normalized through centuries of patriarchal culture. Beauvoir's ideas became the foundation of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 70s, inspiring many famous activists and thinkers. Even today, students and experts of feminist literary criticism, cultural studies, and gender theory refer to her work as an essential resource.

Beauvoir's main point in the book is simple but revolutionary: it is that women aren't "naturally" less powerful than men. Instead, she argues, society has made women accept that standpoint through tradition and upbringing. The argument is that gender inequality is created by humans. This is still just as powerful and relevant today as it was when she first wrote it.

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir presents the argument that women have not been granted the right to exist as autonomous subjects. She writes:
"Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (15).

She explains that women are systematically defined as the "Other" as compared to men and it is not the other way round. In this structure, the woman becomes the inessential 'object'. The below is her words:
"She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other" (16).

On the other hand, she finds men are positioned as the essential, self-determining subject. This deep-rooted patriarchal structure constrains women's freedom while their identity is tied to their biological attributes and socially constructed roles. According to de Beauvoir, women are, therefore, not allowed to form their own independent existence. Beauvoir's pivotal observation that one is not born a woman but rather becomes one, emphasizes that womanhood is not an inherent biological condition but a construct shaped by societal and cultural forces within a patriarchal framework, imposed through upbringing, education, and established norms.

This idea resonates in the story of Tejeemolã, where the protagonist's tragic journey illustrates this concept vividly. Although biologically female and initially valued by her father, Tejeemolã is relegated to the position of the marginalized "Other" within her own family, subjected to oppression and mistreatment by her stepmother. Her suffering serves as a reflection of Beauvoir's contention that women are defined in opposition to men as the "Other," without her autonomous identity and confined to roles in which she becomes objectified. In this analysis we need to look at Beauvoir's use of the elements of the Subject and the Object. Beauvoir highlights how men define themselves as the Subject—the "One" or "Absolute". Women, as we have noted, are relegated to the

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position of the "Other" and are characterized as passive, static, and inessential. While the sovereign subject man acts and transcends, women are positioned as objects who are stripped of agency and confined to a fixed role.

Beauvoir famously argues that womanhood is not an innate quality but rather a social construct. These forces condition women into submission. Women are discouraged from asserting themselves as independent agents or as equal to men. Further, Beauvoir identifies that many women internalize these bonds and accept their subordinate status. As she reasons, it provides the women a sense of security and belonging. As she says
“Now, woman has always been man's dependant, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality. And even today woman is heavily handicapped, though her situation is beginning to change” (19).

Lakshminãth Bezbaroã’s *Burhi Aãir Sãdhu*, translated as *Grandma’s Tales*, was first published in 1911 and is remarkable for its enduring popularity. It is one of the three books in which Bezbaroã has compiled and retold, in his distinctive style, precious Assamese folktales from the rich oral tradition of the region. Among the vastly admired and classic tales in the book is the narrative of “Tejeemolã”. Tejeemolã, the daughter of a merchant, is placed under her stepmother's care when her father departs on an extended journey for trade. Having hidden resentment toward the girl, the stepmother takes this opportunity to inflict harm. She deceives Tejeemolã by giving her a bundle of silk garments, secretly hiding a mouse and hot coal inside. The garments are ruined; and the stepmother uses it as an excuse to subject Tejeemolã to brutal punishment. Her cruelty is even greater when she forces the girl to work at a dhekee— the paddy-grinding pedal, eventually crushing her hands, feet, and finally her head in the tool. It is a horrifying act of violence. Tejeemolã reappears in different forms of rebirth before justice is served.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts the analytical research methodology with specific focus on textual analysis. It applies the method of feminist literary criticism to explore the narrative of Tejeemolã, moving beyond viewing it as a mere cultural tale. It focuses on how the tale presents and upholds ideas about gender. Based on the text of the tale as recounted by Lakshminãth Bezbaroã, the research particularly analyzes the portrayal of women, looking at the roles they are assigned and how the societal forces determine and limit these roles.

Key segments of the tale are examined in depth through close reading, paying close attention to significant scenes and moments and episodes. The research dives into the precise language used in these parts, uncovering deeper layers of meaning beyond surface-level stylistic choices.

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* serves as the foundational theoretical framework for this analysis. The concepts from this critical work are employed to identify and interpret the underlying messages of the narrative. These include the depiction of women as "the Other" and their confinement within restricted societal requirements.

3. LITERARY SOURCES

The analysis in this paper is supported by two primary sources: The primary literary text is Lakshminãth Bezbaroã’s retelling of “Tejeemolã” included in *Burhi Aãir Sãdhu* translated as *Grandma’s Tales* by Pallavi Barua. The theoretical text applied is Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, which provides the critical structure for interpretation.

4. DISCUSSION

The tale of Tejeemolã may be read through the theoretical purview of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir's essential argument in the book is that women have historically been denied the right to carry out as independent beings. Women are always identified in relation to men—as daughters, wives, or mothers—rather than as autonomous individuals with their own inner life, desires, or personal ambitions. Tejeemolã represents this concept perfectly in the particular tale. Her introduction is significant:
"A merchant had two wives. The elder one had a daughter *Tejeemola* by name (Barua 34)."

From the outset, Tejeemolã is, thus, framed within the patriarchal context—defined by her roles as someone's daughter, born to someone's wife, living in someone else's home. She is also the step mother’s eye-sore. Nowhere in the tale do we recognize her ability to project herself into the world, beyond the domestic and bodily confinement, either through action or with choice. When her merchant father departs on a business venture, he places Tejeemolã in the care of his wife, treating her more like some property than as a person, as though she were a possession meant to be safeguarded, handed over from one keeper to the next:
"I am handing over my Tejeemolã to you."

The most brutal representation of this framework is the symbol of the dhekee, the tool used by the step mother to systematically destroy Tejeemolã's body part by part— right hand, left hand, right foot, left foot, and finally the head:
“Then she made Tejeemolã push forward the paddy and began to pound it with great force... she suddenly dropped the pedal on Tejeemolã's right hand. Her right hand being pounded, Tejeemolã began to scream in agony. At this, the step-mother...ordered her to push paddy into the right place using her left hand...the step-mother caused injury to her left hand too...the step-mother told Tejeemolã to push forward the paddy using her right foot and pounded it... Finally the step-mother asked Tejeemolã to push forward the paddy using her head. The step-mother then smashed her head. As a result, Tejeemolã died” (Barua 36-37).

The stepmother’s act may be seen not just as a crime but also as her physical destruction of the girl’s ability to act upon the world. This act can further justify that the step mother enforces Patriarchal norms because it is her means to claim her own sovereignty in her world. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir observes that the male domain represents the "Transcendent" world. When Tejeemolã is killed, her father is far away for trade,

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leaving a void by his absence. Tejeemolã is denied both legal and social protection and is rendered vulnerable. The harsh fact is that Tejeemolã's wellbeing and safety are all dependent on the protection by the only male member, her father. She never initiates an action without permission or order and suffers silently without protest. The other women including the step mother, her friend or the beggar woman in the tale turns their back, are notably absent, or show their harsh side when Tejeemolã needs them. Tejeemolã particularly is the established 'Other' in this observation.

Even when she reappears in different forms such as a gourd plant, a citrus tree in the backyard or a lotus plant upon the river, she is unable to escape or demand justice for herself. In her voice and the song that come only after her death, she is remarkably the feminine and the powerless. Then, the father's return primarily functions to re-establish the patriarchal order. In recovering her he acts authoritatively over Tejeemolã's identity, similar to a powerful agent performing a systematic ritual. Tejeemolã's coming back to human form is not self-willed. The father turns her into a bird and traps her in a cage and later commands her to return to human form:
"After that, he threw his handkerchief on the 'bird' and said, "If you are my Tejeemolã and if I have love for you, you will turn into a human-being by putting on this handkerchief." The 'bird' turned into Tejeemolã herself then and there" (Barua 41) .

5. CONCLUSION

The tale of "Tejeemolã", as retold by Lakshminãth Bezbaroã in *Burhi Aãir Sãdhu*, is more than just a tale of suffering and magical rebirth. When we look at it through the ideas in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, it becomes clear that the narrative reflects deep-rooted patterns of patriarchy and women's oppression.

Beauvoir accepts the existence of biological differences between genders and she only argues that such differences do not justify the subjugation of women. Patriarchal constructs exploit these differences to reinforce women's alleged inferiority. Women are stuck in a role of dependence and they are prevented from realizing their full potential as human beings with dignity.

Right from the beginning, Tejeemolã is introduced only as "the elder wife's daughter." This shows that she is not seen as an independent person, but only in relation to others. She has no real voice, desires, or control over her life. Instead, she exists within a strict family system where she is expected to be quiet, obedient, and passive. In this sense, she represents what de Beauvoir calls "the Other"—someone seen as less important and dependent. Her silence and submissiveness are treated as signs of goodness, suggesting that a "good" woman is one who erases herself and does not assert her individuality.

This idea becomes most disturbing in the scene with the "dhekee", where her stepmother kills her. This is not just an act of violence but a symbolic destruction of everything that gives Tejeemolã independence—her ability to act, move, escape, or even think freely. What makes it even more striking is that this violence happens inside the home, a place usually considered safe for women. Instead of being a place of care, the home becomes a space of danger, supporting de Beauvoir's argument that confining women to domestic life can actually put them at risk.

Even after her death, Tejeemolã does not gain freedom. When she is reborn as different plants—a gourd, a citrus tree, and a lotus—she remains rooted and unable to act on her own. She can only sing sad songs about her suffering. Her voice is limited to expressing pain, not demanding justice or taking control. These songs mainly serve to call her father, who then steps in again to restore the Patriarchal order. This shows that even her supernatural return does not give her real power; instead, it reinforces the idea that change only happens through an involvement of the male.

Tejeemolã's father plays a key role in bringing her back to life, but the way he controls the process—keeping her in a cage, covering her, and giving instructions—shows how male power defines and limits her existence.

What makes "Tejeemolã" especially important is its place in Assamese culture. It is often told as a comforting folktale, passed down through generations in a warm, familiar voice. However, beneath this gentle storytelling, the tale promotes certain ideas about gender: that innocence means being passive, that virtue means being vulnerable, and that justice comes through men. In this way, the story quietly reinforces the same systems of inequality that de Beauvoir criticized.

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