

# Representation of Women in Oral Literature of the Bodos: A Study Based on Transcripts

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## **Abstract: -**

Bodo is the largest tribal group of north-east India having a rich culture and literary record of folk literature. The diverse facets of life of women are found to be depicted in the Bodo folk literatures. Bodo folk women had been taking part equally with men in all household, economic, agricultural and religious works. They act as the chief agent of maintaining culture and tradition of the community. Sometimes, they had to stand against domination and exploitation experienced from their opposite male counterparts in the society. They are the main source of family happiness and represent as adviser of generation as regards how to adjust with age and experience. They have contributed their own life towards the formation of a civilised society. Besides, Bodo women led the community side many times in fighting the enemies for protection of their land. All these pictures are seen to be depicted in the oral literature of the Bodos. On the other hand, along with all these appreciable role and characters, their ill and evil characters also have been portrait in the Bodo oral literature. The present study would be an attempt to highlight the characters of Bodo folk women that are being depicted in their oral literature.

**Keywords:** Bodo, depiction, oral literature, representation, social picture, tradition, women

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Oral literature and Bodo oral literature**

The type of literature which have come down generations orally among the uneducated folk is called Folk Literature. This type of literature which did not acquire written form happens to be anonymous. But the creators of such literature were individuals in the society with creative mind.

Through folk literature social and historical picture of the activities, thoughts, beliefs, religion, rituals, economy, recreation among a group of people get reflected. Literary critics opine that in all literature such oral literature originated prior to written literature. Oral literature got written form for the first time at the hands of two German brothers Jacob Grimm and Wilhem Grimm through the "Household Tales" edited out in 1812 A.D. [1]

Oral Literature of the Bodos first got written form through "Outline Grammar of the Kachari (*Bara*) Language (as spoken in Darrang district, Assam) in 1884 A.D. by a Christian missionary Rev. Sidney Endle [2]. Following him, J.D. Anderson edited out "A Collection of Kachari Folk Tales and Rhymes" in 1895 A.D. [3]. After this, Rev. Endle compiled his classic work "The Kacharis" in 1911 A.D. [4]. In this work, he, for the first time, printed the forms of Bodo folk songs.

Following these contributions by foreign missionaries only, other works on Bodo folk literature got published. Modern critics of Bodo literature have made efforts to classify the Bodo folk literature into five types: - 1. Folk Narrative, Myth, Legend, Folk tale, 2. Folk Song, 3. Proverb, 4. Riddle and 5. Charm [5].

### **1.2 Representation in literature**

Representation is an interesting part of literature. According to Mitchel, representation is the use of signs that stand in for and take the place of something else [6]. It is through representation that people organize the world through the act of naming its elements. In other words, the signs used for expressing something itself is representation. Although this definition is widely accepted, the mechanical definition given by James O. Young is noteworthy. According to him, R is representation of some object O if and only if R is intended by a subject S to stand for O and an audience A (where A is not identical to S) can recognize that R stands for O [7].

In literary theory, the term representation gives many meaning, yet representation is presented in three ways – 1. To look like or resemble, 2. To stand in for something or someone, and 3. To present a second time; to re-present.

From the current study point of view, the above second definition of representation seems to be more conformable.

### 1.3 Aim and objective

The aim of this study is to enquire how women have been represented in the oral literature of the Bodos. It is intended to perform the analysis based on the transcripts of different components of oral literature of the Bodos.

## 2. Materials and methods

Descriptive method of analysis has been adopted for the current study. Oral literatures of the Bodos have been collected from secondary sources. Available transcripts of four components of Bodo oral literature, viz. folk songs, folk tales, proverbs and riddles, have been collected from different secondary sources.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Various aspects of women are found depicted in folk literature of the Bodos. An effort is being made to present an analysis on it.

### 3.1 Women in Social Picture depicted in the Bodo folk songs

#### 3.1.1 Upbringing of Family

In the patriarchal Bodo family system, the women have been taking part equally in looking after the family. Besides household works, they have come out to paddy field carrying out activities like plantation along with the male folk. This gets reflected very well through the following folk song relating to clearing of forest –

*“Hinjao houa boibw  
Khouse jananwi Halao thangni  
Hadankhou siphatharnanggou  
Ayo Jwsa Maibra golai mwnder  
Gasibw gajwbtharnanggou.”* [8]

*[ Males and females all  
Let's go to the paddy field  
The jungle must be cleared  
Oh, we must produce here  
Jwsa maibra mixed breed.]*

Since time immemorial, Bodo women have been helping boost of economy of the family feeding through cooking, dressing through weaving and the like. Various folk songs have originated around the active part of women in the society. Expertise in household works and economy in maintaining the family have been depicted in the following way–

*“Thinthing khalai mwjanglwi  
Wi hinjaofwr nai nai  
Angni hinjaokhou haba rwnga rwnga hwnnaya  
Daukha labwnai musra gorsekhounw Gamsa jora dihunbai  
Nai hinjaophwr nai nai  
Angni hinjaokhou angkhou ona ona hwnnaya  
Daukha labwnai goi thaisekhounw  
Phathwi gangsejwng bese jarou jahwbai  
Wi hinjaophwr nai nai.”* [9]

*[ Thinthing khalai is very good  
Oh women dear see  
You told my wife does not know to work  
Have weave out a pair of gamsa*

By a single scroll of yarn brought by a crow  
 Oh women dear see.  
 You told my wife does not love me  
 Have fed me a nut brought by a crow  
 So coloured with a single beetle leaf  
 Oh women dear see.]

### 3.1.2 As Home Goddess

Women are the main source of enriching a family and happiness in the family. People believe that the happiness of a family can return through the fortune of a wife. This has been depicted clearly through a folk tale “Lwkhishree” [10]. In that tale, the property of Alsiya’s family kept growing only after marrying Lwkhishree.

Such a thought and belief among the Bodos have percolated through a number of proverbs. Following are few examples in this respect ---

1. *Bwswrse abad jaywikhou dagab*  
*Hinjao haba rwngwikhou gab.*  
 [ Do not cry that crop has not grown in a year  
 Weep that your wife does not to work.]
2. *Houaphra hagrani*  
*Hinjaophra no 'ni.*  
 [ Menfolk are outsiders  
 Women are of home.]

### 3.1.3 As Advisors

During marriage, Bodo women folk with age and experience try to console the bride by singing meaningful songs. Besides, they try to give her lesson about how to behave after marriage in the new family, how to adjust with own community and society. Such role of mother folk has been depicted clearly in the following farewell song–

“Dagabswi aywi dagabswi, dagabswi  
 Oma gidir'a baro khurmani  
 Phisa hinjao'a malaini. Dagabswi aywi dagabswi  
 Gabblabw khublabbw nwma nwmpahaya mwnliya.  
 Mephal houanw horakhwi  
 Boroni asar, Boroni bisarjwng  
 Boro harinw hordwng, hordwng raijw janwsw.  
 Gabnai khunaikhou nagarnanwi  
 Anan gosai Binan gosaikhou  
 Athing gajob akhai narjob  
 Khalamnanwi Rongja-bajasw  
 Maowi dangwi raijw jadw.” [9]  
 [ Don't cry oh my lad, don't cry  
 The big pig is of kith and kin  
 Daughters are for others, don't cry  
 Your parents shall not get back even if they cry.  
 You have not been given to alien boy  
 By Bodo custom Bodo tradition  
 Have been given to a Bodo boy, to make a life.  
 Leave crying and weeping.  
 Praying God Anan gosai Binan gosai  
 Kneeling before them You're to lead a family life now.]

### 3.1.4 As multi-faceted family guide

A woman has to keep on changing own action and views with age and experience. For sake of running the family, she has to keep on changing role sometimes as earner, sometimes as guardian. These roles of a women have been depicted in the following proverbs–

1. “Houaya nagirw no-bang  
 Hinjaoa nagirw hisri-hebra.”

[ Males seek buildings  
 Woman seek wretched clothes.]  
 2. *Bimaya naiyw mwkhangao*  
*Hinjaoa naiyw siphiyao*  
*Phisaya naiyw khosoao.*”  
 [ Mothers look at face  
 Wife look at pocket  
 Kids look at the Khoso<sup>1</sup>.]

### 3.1.5 As kind caretaker

In case of need, women can take care of someone becoming a mother. The cared one can get relief by forgetting the state of being parentless, that women occupies the place of the mother. This heavy role of woman has been depicted in the folk literature in Bodo. In the folk tale “*Jom Dakhini Dauni Solo*” [11]. younger brother of a hunter who has lost his mother, did not feel absence of mother getting due care from elder sister-in law. In time of accompanying elder brother to hunting, when at night the ghost ate up the younger brother to neck, his skull just repeated the urge before his elder brother – “Oh brother! Do not leave me. Take me home along. I want to see my elder sister-in law.”

Even while elder brother brought the shopped off head and showed to his wife, the head turned to a bird and sitting on branch of a tree continued to say– “Oh brother! Do not leave me. Take me home along, I want to see my elder sister-in law.”

The voice of that younger brother of the hunter harbouring wish to see his elder sister-in law even after death, make one feel the motherly heart of a woman. May be overwhelmed by this serene feeling, males who are younger brother-in law by relation, take chance to lighten their flight by singing–

“*Ouani khanjong khanai khakhw*  
*Gwdwni din'a bwjwng thangkhw,*  
*Bedorni akhai, jouni phukhriya*  
*Gwilyalwi bajwi gwiliya.*” [11]  
 [ Clip your hair as if comb of bamboo  
 Where have vanished the olden days  
 Heap of meat, pond of wine  
 There is no more oh dear elder sister-in law.]

Not only the elder sisters-in law, in time of need the elder sisters also have to shoulder the role of a mother. The real picture has been depicted through the folk tale “*Dao Khokhling*” [10]. When the step mother caused death of the son through a snake bite then the elder sister embraced him with tears in eye and kept on searching their mother. Such roles of elder sisters also have been depicted through the child consoling songs among the Bodos.

### 3.2 Traditional and cultural pictures of Bodo women depicted in the folk literature

Bodo culture is essentially a traditional culture where it has come down o generation through learning. Bodo women folk are the carrier of own culture. They are expert in visualizing the beauty of nature through making designs on cloth. The mature knowledge of Bodo women in this respect gets reflected in the folk songs –

*Dehai lwgw!*  
*Boro bimani danai – lunai*  
*Agor ernaikhou swlwngdini,*  
*Okhrangao dau birnai, Sikhiri bidwi swbnai*  
*Agor erwi-erwi khwnthani lwgw khwnthani.* [9]  
 [ Dear friends!  
 Let's learn the art of weaving of Bodo mothers,  
 Birds flying in the sky, butterfly taking sweets from flowers

<sup>1</sup> The front part of the Bodo women attire *dokhona*; the *dokhona* is worn in such a technique that a part comes out of covering in triangle size in between the breasts; this is usually used to keep something if and when necessary.

*Let's show through making designs on cloth.]*

### 3.3 As harbinger of tradition and child rearer

In Bodo folk tales, an effort is seen to maintain purity of relation by not allowing it to get tainted. In the old folk tale “*Jaraphagla*” [11], the youngest daughter-in law Monggli scented foul in undue love given by father-in law and so as to help bar him from crossing the social limit put by tradition, herself slept away from in-law's house.

But Monggli was a woman of sacred heart, hence she was not able to hurt the heart of another forever. When Jaraphagla realized his mistake and held a “Kherai” in the family, she appeared before father-in law in the guise of a mother.

The way in which women have been established as mother in the story of *Jaraphagla* may be termed as much higher than ones in the Hindu religious stories. The sacred character of Monggli has shown the path of religious worship and taught the Bodos to lead life through a civilized culture.

The fight of Bodo women for preservation of tradition has clearly been depicted in the story of “Raona - Raoni.” [2]. According to the story, Raona and Raoni both were children of the same king. But when grown up, Raona tried to marry Raoni securing consent from mother. As soon as Raoni learnt it from an old woman in the pond, she fled away to sky.

Through the scene of flying towards sky fleeing away from home, the Bodos have preached it worldwide on the ethical bar on sexual relation among related by blood and it has firmly been established as tradition.

### 3.4 As merry-making folk

During the festivals, women folk have been taking active part along with men folk in all works and merry-making. In the new-year day, girls have been expressing her mind by giving a designed scurf to the boy she loves. This have been picturized through *Bwisagu* songs as following-

1. *Agwi Bwisagi phwidw nwnng*  
*Dana bwthwr janaikhai rongjagwn jwnng.*
2. *Ada Phuaram lwgw lwgw thangdwng*  
*Gamsa hwdwng, phali hwdwng, manw bwrabdwng?*
3. *Ada Raguna pharia, wi phariya*  
*Oma masea khosa juriya*  
*Dausa maseya khosa juriya ada juriya.*

- [ 1. Oh Bwisagi dear, come along  
As season begun, we shall make merry.  
2. Dear Phuaram has come along  
Has given cloth, scurf why getting offended?  
3. Oh lad Raguna, my lad  
A single pig is not sufficient  
A chick is not sufficient, not sufficient.]

### 3.5 Love for own land and people by Bodo women picturised in folk songs

Right since ancient times, Bodo women have been fighting for protection of own kingdom from aggression by others. For this, many of them have sacrificed their own life. These events have been established through Bodo folk songs. In bellads and folk tales like Birgwsari, Gambari, Odang, Thengphakhri fights against Bhutiya and English army have been narrated. Those all heroines sacrificed their own life by fighting against occupation, subjugation, domination and exploitation by other people. Their might and courage have been encouraging the following generations for protection of self from enemies. This sentiment has been percolating through folk songs ---

*“Swrba Banggal phwibai*  
*Malaini deshkhau sekhophwibai,*  
*Dagi dagi rouniyaphwr*  
*Dong jwnghabw Gambari Sikhla*  
*Jenthara jwngbw biswrjwnng ala-mala.” [8]*  
*[ Some foreigners have come over*  
*Have snatched away other's land*

*Don't get frightened dear fighters  
We too, have Gambari the heroine  
We shall not get defeated anyway.]*

Mothers are the creator, caretaker and guide of all. Survival and development of a land and people can't be materialized without guidance of the mother folk. On this feeling, patriotic songs have got birth among the Bodos—

*“--- Siri mwndiya bima dabwnw  
Undulangkhgw manw gwdw-gwdw  
Sikhangdw, siri mwndw  
Gwdwnai harikhou dikhanglangdw  
Hadwrkhou phwsablangdw.” [9]  
[ You've not awoken up still  
Why you've been sleeping so deep  
Awake up, stand up  
Erect the people in deep slumber  
Reform the land we've born.]*

### 3.6 Subjugation and domination on Bodo women picturised in Bodo folk literature

Pictures of Bodo women being dominated and exploited in the society is spread over pages of Bodo folk literature. Their humanistic value is being bound by male and female both in the society. Among the folk tales of the sort, in the story “*Bida Binanaoni Solo*” [8] the elder brother had murdered his own sister. In the story “*Sase Rajaya Sasni Rani Lanai*” the youngest queen has been deserted in the forest for giving birth to an egg [8].

Besides these, elders in the society abusing the women folk, humiliating them and discarding them have been picturized through various proverbs as the following—

1. *Na Sandaha bigur gwiya  
Golamni phisaha akhol gwiya.*
2. *Sikha gwdana santham  
Hinjao gwdana dantham*
3. *No burwikhou dadangdao  
Hinjao randikhou daegdao.*
4. *Abadkhou mao khathiyao  
Phisakhou bilai gwjanao.  
[ 1. Sanda fish have no skin  
The poors have no moral.  
2. New knife lasts for three days  
New bride lasts for three months.  
3. Don't, touch an old house  
Don't joke a widow.  
4. Produce paddy by side  
Give away daughters to distant place.]*

In an unarranged love marriage, girls enter into a house of a boy only after agreement on the matter. But the boy's side, even before knowing about the girl, send *khobira* (messenger) to her family and inform that in humiliating words—

*“Swrniba mwsou dambriya  
Jwngni goliyao sunsrihwidwngmwn;  
Jwngbw mwsou dambrikhou  
Khabthana lakhigarbai;  
Khwnanw mwnnai badibla  
Be mwsou dambriya nwnghangninw.” [13]  
[ Someone's female calf  
Have entered our cowshed  
We have kept the calf bound*

*Now we learn that  
The calf belongs to you].*

Aggrieved by exploitation by family and society, heart of women folk cry and comes out during the Bwishagu–

*“Thuhai lwgw bwi mwigongkhounw khana langni  
Ai aphayabw haba hora  
Bida phongbaijwngbw rajlithaoa  
Bwthwra thangbai khwndw khwndw  
Jwngni bwiswabw thangbai halw-dwilw.” [9]  
[ Friends! Let’s pluck that vegetable  
Parents do not give us to marry  
Can’t divulge it before the brothers too,  
Time is passing out in periods  
Our age also has increased silently.]*

In the patriarchal Bodo society, subjugation of women in sexual perspectives gets reflected through folk literature. The body of women is made up of beautiful parts. They have to witness many untoward incidents beyond their imagination. In many cases, women have been assaulted sexually by the members of the family itself. This rude fact has been portrait by a few Bodo folk tales.

For example, in the folk tale “*Ālari dambra*”, the king Baubuli Raja tried to marry own sisters Ashagi and Bwishagi who had been arranged for marriage to others. As he assaulted, they fled away towards the sky to save themselves [12].

At the same time, in many folk tales the women have been portrait as exploiter. Women subjugating women, women dominating men folk also are available in the following folk tales–

1. In the folk tale “*Dau Khokhling*”, the second wife puts the first wife to death through snake-bite [10].
2. In “*Mayasi*” the widow mother Gageb giving out her eldest daughter Mayasi from family and compel to live in forest [14].
3. In the story of “*Chandramali – Khwthia Budang*” Chandramali trying to kill Khwthia as she disliked him for marriage with her [12].
4. In the folk tale “*Hadi Dogla*” we find Habari torturing own husband on instigation by Hamphe the virgin as a result of which he had to take appearance of a hurricane [10].

### 3.7 Use of Bodo women as symbol and allegory

The beauty of Bodo women could arouse love in the hearts of men folk. The philosophy of beauty and love have got expressed in allegorical form –

*“Nolbarini Khaya Babuni khundung mutha  
O’ agwi sona  
Nwngni mwdwmao naibwla agor gotha.  
Agor ghothanibw dai nangswi  
Khundung muthanibw dai nangswi  
Golbandani Lily gorania  
Bari khonani mwitha dembai  
Lwi agwi mwitha dembai,  
O’ lwi agwi  
Nwngni Khoroa don khaorai.” [9]  
[ The bundle of yarn from Nalbari’s Marowari merchant  
Oh dear we see your body full of design.  
You’ve been found at fault your designs in body  
You’ve been found at fault for the bundle of yarn even  
Oh Lily the heroine from village Golbanda.  
Leafy Mwitha plant in the corner of homestead*

*Oh dear your hair is like a basket for keeping rice.]*

In the riddles even, mother protecting children has been expressed through symbols in the following way --

1. *Phisakhou lainw thangbla Bimaya khebnanwi horw --- Khunthai nara.*
2. *Phisaya khiyw, Bimaya ajaow --- Sandri-Songgrai.*
3. *Phisaya thobloyw, Bimaya naihorw --- Balthing-Dwihu.*

- [ 1. Mother bites when one tries to take away her child --- *plant Khunthai nara.*  
 2. The child defecates; Mother holds out --- *Shieve-Songgrai.*  
 3. The child deeps; Mother keep looking in --- *Pail- Earthen jar]*

On the other hand, women of lazy and uncivilized character have ben portrait comparing them in folk songs with beasts ---

*“Swi swi swima daduri ri ri  
 Dor phangthe phangthe, khona laywi laywi  
 Naikhwmanai hinjaoa  
 Undu gaduri, undu gaduri.” [9]  
 [ Go away dog skin shelved  
 Shutting the door, taking side in corners  
 A woman who watch from distance  
 Happens to be woman in deep slumber.]*

#### 4. Conclusion

In Bodo folk literature, characters of women have been depicted in various ways. Their possession of immense beauty, creation of rites and rituals, holding on to tradition, reformation of society, love for own land and people, leading the culture of the human group have been depicted in a favourable way. In other way round, the characters of exploitation and domination, subjugation and tolerance, unkind heart and crooked mind have been depicted in a dismal manner.

Thus, the women have been depicted in Bodo folk literature in two different and opposite ways. In one way, they have been portrait as representative of civilised society and on the other hand, they have been portrait as representative of ills and evils.

Mention may be made of the fact that this discussion is based on folk literature of the Bodos which have acquired printed form till now. The rest which did not get printed form till date could not be covered by this dissertation. Hence enough scope is left for further study on this subject. More enlightened discourse on the topic may be expected in times to come.

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