



# Women's Representation in Bodo Literature: A Socio-Cultural Analysis

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## Abstract:

Literature is like a mirror of society. Social pictures of society are reflected clearly in literature. The habits of people, their doing, thinking, etc. along with existing culture are portrayed by the writers in their writing. The Bodos of northeast India are a large and well-known tribal inhabitant of Assam. They also have different types of literature, rich with their own cultural and linguistic diversity, reflecting the ethos and experiences of the Bodo people. Women, as a part of society, their status had reflected differently at different literature works of Bodos. Early literature like myths, legends, folk songs and tales, narrated women as heroines, social workers, baby carers of the society. They are portrayed simply as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers in society. They had passed their lives within the four boundaries of the house doing hardly all the household chores. They sacrificed their lives for the happiness of the family, tolerate silently the problems they faced, and serviced for the family members. They were uneducated, loyal to their husband, and had no connection with the outside world. But in today's modern literature, women are displayed the opposite of earlier as changed their habits and characters with time and situations. They have been portrayed as educated, who try to be free from their racial social norms, and love to be free from the dominance of males and other family members. On the other hand, the voice of rights and liberty of women are tried to raise in literary work by female and some male writers. This study investigated the evolution of women's portrayal in Bodo literature, from traditional roles rooted in folklore and mythology to modern interpretations that challenge stereotypes and depict women as agents of change. It explores narratives that address issues such as gender inequality, cultural identity, and women's empowerment within the Bodo society. By analysing prominent literary texts and their socio-cultural contexts, the paper aims to uncover the complex dynamics shaping gender perceptions and norms within Bodo literature. Moreover, the research discusses the influence of Bodo female writers and their contributions to reshaping narratives and advocating for gender equity through literature.

**Key Words:** Women, Representation, Literature, Socio-cultural and Bodo writers

## 1.1 Introduction:

The Bodo community of northeast India is a large well-known tribal inhabitant of Assam. They have rich literary works of tradition and modernity that reflect the social, cultural, and political ethos of men as well as women. The representation of women in the literature is a significant aspect that merits scholarly attention due to its implications for gender studies, cultural identity, and social norms. Historically, Bodo literature is dominated by oral traditions. Folktales, songs, myths, and legends passed down through generations served as the primary medium of storytelling. In early narratives, women often appeared in traditional roles, reflecting the societal norms and expectations of the time. In the myths and legends, they were depicted as warriors or heroines who fought against the enemies of their native land. They always did hard work for their subjects. On the other hand, in many folk songs the women are depicted as mothers, daughters, and wives whose lives revolved around domestic responsibilities and familial duties. These stories and tales, while sometimes limiting in their portrayal of women, also highlighted

their resilience, wisdom, and indispensable role in the community. As a daughter they learned all the household chores from a young stage including cooking, cleaning, washing, weaving etc. They had not related to school education. Till the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many guardians kept their daughters as maidservants in others' house for rice or money to run their family. After the marriage they got busy in serving her husband and their family members. Maximum women needed to stay busy with their farming work of family e.g. paddy plantation in summer; crop harvesting, farming of vegetables and weaving clothes in winter. As the main livelihood of the Bodos is agriculture, all the family members including women need to stay busy with a variety of farming-related work which is depicted in old Bodo literature.

Gradually, all these pictures have seen a dramatic change from the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the evolving in society. The advent of written Bodo literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked a significant shift. The people of society started to educate their daughters which was not given importance in the early period. This period saw the emergence of female writers who began to challenge traditional narratives and offer new perspectives on women's lives. At present many of them are educated, raise voice for their equal right, trying to come out from their social norms and restrictions, and want to lead a free life. Many women writer express their thinking through literature. They don't want to live under any male dominance. The representation of women characters in Bodo literature spans various genres including folk tales, myths, legends, songs, poetry, novels, and plays, each offering unique insights into the roles, experiences, and aspirations of women within Bodo society. These representations are not merely reflections of artistic expression but also mirror the evolving status and perception of women in the community across different historical epochs.

In this study, an attempt is made to examine how Bodo literature portrays women in roles such as mothers, daughters, wives, and community leaders. These roles often encapsulate the complexities of gender dynamics within the Bodo cultural framework, highlighting issues of agency, empowerment, and traditional expectations. By analysing literary texts ranging from ancient oral traditions to contemporary writings, this research aims to uncover the changing narratives surrounding women in Bodo society. Moreover, the socio-cultural analysis of women in Bodo literature will explore themes such as identity, resilience, resistance, and the negotiation of cultural boundaries. Through these themes, the paper seeks to elucidate how Bodo women negotiate their agency and navigate the socio-cultural landscape as depicted in literary works.

Furthermore, this research will delve into the contributions of women writers and poets within the Bodo literary tradition, examining how their voices have reshaped and diversified the portrayal of women in Bodo literature. By highlighting these contributions, the study aims to underscore the importance of gender inclusivity and representation in fostering a more inclusive and equitable literary discourse.

### 1.2 Aims of study:

1. To analyse the historical portrayal of women in traditional and modern Bodo literature. And try to understand the roles and representations of women in Bodo literary work, and how these reflect societal norms of the time.
2. To trace the evolution of women's representation in Bodo literature from oral traditions to contemporary written forms. And try to study the representation of women in Bodo performance arts, such as traditional dances and dramas, and their connection to literary works. To assess the impact of these visual and dynamic representations on the broader understanding of women's role in Bodo culture.
3. To study the themes and narratives explored by female authors and how they differ from or challenge traditional male-centric perspectives. Through this study try to assess how modern literary works address issues such as education, domestic violence and gender discrimination.

### 1.3 Methodology and data:

This research employs a qualitative approach to conduct a socio-cultural analysis of women's representation in Bodo literature. Qualitative methods are deemed suitable for this study as they allow for an in-depth exploration and interpretation of

textual materials within their cultural and historical contexts, thereby facilitating a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding gender representation in literature.

### Research Design:

The study adopts a descriptive and interpretative research design. This design is chosen to systematically analyse and interpret the portrayal of women in Bodo literary texts across various genres and historical periods. By employing this approach, the research aims to uncover recurring themes, motifs, and narrative strategies used to depict women in Bodo literature.

### Data Collection:

1. **Literary Texts:** The primary data for this research consists of Bodo literary texts such as folk tales, folk-songs, legend, prose, poetry, novels, short stories, and plays. These texts will be selected based on their thematic relevance to gender roles, women's experiences, and socio-cultural dynamics within the Bodo community. Texts will be chosen from both classical and contemporary periods to capture historical changes and continuities in gender representation.
2. **Secondary Sources:** Secondary sources including scholarly articles, books, and critical analyses on Bodo literature, gender studies, and socio-cultural studies will complement the primary data. These sources will provide theoretical frameworks, comparative insights, and contextual information necessary for a comprehensive analysis.

### Data Analysis:

The analysis will be conducted through the following steps:

1. **Textual Analysis:** Close reading and thematic analysis of selected literary texts to identify patterns, representations, and portrayals of women.
2. **Contextual Analysis:** Examination of socio-cultural contexts within which these literary texts were produced and received, considering factors such as historical events, cultural practices, and societal norms.
3. **Comparative Analysis:** Comparison of different literary works and genres to identify common themes, divergent representations, and changes over time in the portrayal of women.

Through a qualitative research methodology encompassing descriptive and interpretative approaches, this study aims to contribute valuable insights into the representation of women in Bodo literature. By exploring the textual, contextual, and socio-cultural dimensions, the research seeks to enhance understanding of gender dynamics and cultural representations within the Bodo literary tradition.

### 1.4 Theme and representation:

The representation of women across different genres of literature as character are discussed separately in the following. The gender roles, women's experiences, and socio-cultural dynamics of change within the Bodo community will be looked at. Besides this, women's representation as characters in textual, and their participation as authors to explore women's problems and seek measures for the issue will be assessed.

#### 1.4.1 Women in legend:

In traditional Bodo's legend women played an important role in society. The names of such women are *Gambari Sikhla*, *Birgwshri Sikhla*, *Jarwu Sikhla*, *Daori Sikhla*, *Nakhathi Sikhla*, *Thengphakhri Sikhla* etc. All of them were very famous in Bodo society. Among them, the story of *Gambari* and *Birgwshri Sikhla* are worth mentionable. The folk narratives told us that once they led our society holding prestigious portfolios. The heroic activities of *Gambari* and *Birgwshri's* story tell us how the Bodo women deployed themselves in service of motherland and its people. They fought riding on horses by wielding swords to defend their subjects and to drive away their enemies. Their heroic works are still remembered and praised by the people of the community and encouraged to work for the country.

### 1.4.2 Women in Folk Songs:

The folk songs of Bodos depicted women as normal housewives. The main responsibilities of the women was postered as homemakers, family caretakers, and maintainers of the home by doing all the household chores. In many folk songs, Bodo women were depicted as the preserver of culture. They are being survived the culture through the activities like spinning and weaving, wearing traditional dresses, holding traditional songs and dances, obeying societal norms and restrictions etc. Spinning yarn from eri cocoon and weaving clothes were common works of Bodo women. All women learned this work since the early age from their mother or other senior members of the family or village. Such activities of the Bodo women are reflected in many folk songs scattered in society. One of such folk song is as follows-

*“Dehai lwgw bima burwini  
Danai lunai agor ernaikhwu swlwngdwni,  
Sikhiri bidwi swbnai, Okhrangao dao birnai,  
Agor erwi erwi bwinibw sigangao  
Khinthani lwgw khinthani”.*

*(English rendering: O’ friends, let us learnt the skills of spinning, weaving and designing from old mother. Let us show the people picture of butterfly sitting on flower, flying of bird in sky by designing on the clothes)*

Many themes of folk songs are the virtue of sacrifice. Women are often depicted as paragons of virtue, willing to endure suffering for the greater good of their families or communities. This portrayal, while highlighting the resilience and strength of women, also reinforces traditional gender roles where women’s primary identity is linked to their capacity for sacrifice and endurance.

### 1.4.3 Women in prose literature:

The discussion on the issue and problem of women in Bodo prose could be seen from the very beginning of written literature. The status of the women, how they are considered in society etc. were discussed in “*Boroni Phisa O Ayen*” (1915). At that time, they were not very conscious of women’s status and did not think about their freedom. They were not allowed to involved in commercial work, but were compelled to be busy with household work, child care and similar other tasks. Those who wanted to come out of such situation were badly criticised and misbehaved by the society. Once a time, the girls were forcefully captured and taken away for marriage without any information or consent which grabbed the freedom of women. The overview on such situation is found in the said book.

In some prose of ‘*Bibar age*’ of the Bodo literature, freedom seized and domination behaviour on women are narrated. Rangdini Phagli, in her article “*Bathrani Serwi Solo*”, said that ‘*the women were regard as a thing of playing by all*’. It means that women were used and regarded only as thing for enjoyment, but not for other work. Women’s education was not spread and the importance of it was not given. Another prose named “*Noni Maidang*” (Wealth of house) by Ananda Ram Muchahary is a precious article specially composed based on women’s character and behaviour. To be a happy family, first of all, women’s behaviour should be good and adorable. Today, many of them are appeared as naughty, cruel and disobedient. Therefore, good moral lessons should be taught to nurse their habits and behaviour to make them obedient and piety.

Today in many prose of modern literature, the matter of women’s education, and their equal rights and status to men are frequently discussed. For the development of a society, women must be educated. If not, then fails to provide proper guidance to their children by leading the family in the right direction. Giving importance on women’s education, Korindra Narayan Brahma in his article “*Boro Jatilo Du- Akharman*” (A few words to the Bodo community) said that due to lack of education, Bodo women could not become humble, piety and obedient. So, they loved to quarrel and failed in leading the family by managing the servants and holding all the members together. In this way, in many modern articles, emphasis is given on their character building to be humble and religious.

#### 1.4.4 Women in Bodo Poetry:

Early Bodo poetry, much like the folk songs and tales, reflects a similar portrayal of women. In 'Angni Khwina' (my bride), poet Rupnath Brahma described women as kind-hearted, a source of peace and happiness, and helpful through his 'khwina' (bride) who always tries for the best and welfare of her husband as well as family members. The women are compared with mother Goddesses (Sakti devi) by Kali Kumer Lahary in the poem 'Jakhad Boibw Boro Bima' (Gets up all the Bodo mother), without the help of whom only male community cannot succeed in their way of life and work for development. In this way, the beauty of women which can provide joy and cheer to man or her beloved is reflected in the poems of poets like Ishan Chandra Mwashahary, Kali Kumer Lahary, Kamal Kumer Brahma and others. The beauty of women as a source of inspiration to her beloved is expressed by Kali Kumer Lahary as follows-

*“Asi miji, jathai riji, megon bersrang mini swrang,  
Nong badi hinjau mulugao nuwakhwi ang.  
Habab sona, habab roji, habab phangdang,  
Thwilai ujilai jiu thangblabo nongkhwo monwithwng ang.  
Jabla gosoa urang pharang,  
Nongkhwo jeblabo onsaiswi ang,  
Ayo sona, roji, phangdang angni jionang.”*

(English rendering: - Beautiful small fingers, tiny teeth, beautiful eyes, smiling face; rare to find women like you. O' my darling, I want to find you always even my death. When become unsteady, I want your presence near my O' my darling.)

Like early poetry, modern poetry also depicts a variety of appearances of women. Their sacrifice for the family and loss of freedom of life due to domination by other members is raised in the voice of some poets. Different forms of behaviour of different women, their hopes, aspirations, willingness and appearance as daughter, sister, sister-in-law, and daughter-in-law, mother along with roles and responsibilities to be performed are portrayed in the poems of some poets. Such descriptions of the women can be seen in the poems of Samar Brahma Choudhury, Manaranjan Lahary, Bijay Baglary, Dhananjay Brahma, prominent women poet of the Bodos Anju Narzary, Indira Boro, Rupashri Hazowary, new poet Santi Basumatary, Mainaoshri Daimary and many others. The oppression of women at different stages of life is sketched by Indira Boro as follows-

*“Suni suni ma jiu nwngni  
Gotho somao singao biphani,  
Haba jabla singao phisaini  
Arw burwikhalao phisajlani”*

(English rendering: - What an unfortunate your life is; during childhood you are dominated by father; after marriage you are dominated by husband and during old age by son.)

The problems, struggle to survive etc. that often occur during the lifetime of women are portrayed by Santi Basumatary in her poetry book "Thwinikhruibw Gwjasin Nwngni Gaba" (Your colour is red than blood). On the other hand, the voice of freedom to be given to the women to do according to their choice and please is raised in the poem of Bijay Baglary "Barse Bibar Biyw" (It is a flower). Anju also has written many such poems depicting the unbearable grief of women.

#### 1.4.5 Women in Bodo novel:

There are some Bodo novels specially created based on woman's behaviour and activities depicting their peculiar characters. In present society, there are such type of women who do not care about societal norms and conventions, nor obey their parents and society. They want to be free like flying birds in the sky and dislike any limitation in their enjoyment. The 'Rebecca' of Monoranjan Lahary is such a type of novel where illicit and disobedient characters of the women are reflected. Rebecca was a sexually hungry girl, and to fulfil her desire, she ignored social restrictions and conventions. She kept illicit sexual relations from an early age with different people for which she has to face various problems. Even after marriage, she did not change her

character and continued illicit sexual relation with other persons. Such incident is habitually committed by some women in present society which news can be heard every day.

The bold, frank, courageous, ambitious, straightforward, outspoken, well-disciplined, broad-minded and obedient personalities of the women are tried to depict in the novel '*Alaisri*'. Alaisri was a studious student who was highly ambitious and wanted to be high-ranking officer like IAS/IPS. In the novel, she is depicted as a modern educated and very courageous girl who easily succeeds in her challenging life with a bad scoundrel and the rascal hero of the novel.

On the other hand, the common characters and incidents with some adorable and special behaviour of the women of present sceneries are depicted in many novels. In '*Bigrai arw Dwisrai*' of Tiren Boro, Dwisrai appeared as social worker and leader who was involved in the Bodoland movement and sacrificed her life on behalf of the society. In the novel she is reflected as an educated and courageous woman who make a debate with the police for their rights when they go to meet Bigrai (the hero of the novel) in jail. The real incidents that happened during the Bodoland movement are portrayed in this novel. The novel '*Jwngthi*' written by Dhireswar Boro Narzi depicted women as playing objects of male use to fulfil their sexual desire only. The character of *Jwngthi* is represented in novel as helpless women who silently tolerate all the cruelty and harassment of men and sacrifice her life. The novel '*Daini*' of M.R. Lahary depicts the tragic and horror life of a poor widow who became a victim of superstition existing in society. The word *Daini* is a nomenclature of evil word given to the person who has the power of black magic to harm or even kill the people. Due to such belief in society, many poor people often become victims in the strong action of superstitious. Besides such specific characters, the common and habitual incidents of the women characters are represented in many novels by different novelists.

#### 1.4.6 Women in Bodo short stories:

The women's problems like oppression and exploitation are mostly portrayed in Bodo short stories. In '*Bandi*' of Manaranjan Lahary, the tragic slavery life of a girl is depicted where she has no right to mention even a single word against owner, but her service is necessary for the family. The ill behaviour of the rich owners towards their maidservants is reflected in the story. Instead of providing security, the wife of Dhonbir is involved in the punishment of the poor maidservant through which the cruel character of wealthy women is depicted. But in the short story '*Bis*' (poison) by Lakheswar Brahma, the right of women education is given stress. Through the main character of the story Binaram, the story writer tried to inspire the women to have an education for themselves and society's development.

Educated, talent and expert girls grown in the city are depicted in the short story '*Hagra Guduni Mwi*' (Deer of dense forest) by Nilkamal Brahma. It is not easy to understand the mindset and thinking of educated girls like Sarmila (female round character of the story) as their speeches do not express everything openly. Such girls treat everyone in the same manner and talk openly, but the meaning may not be as someone assumes. Understanding the actual meaning of such a girl's behaviour is as difficult as tracing out the deer of dense forest. In the story, the male round character Satyapriya takes a misconception of Sarmila's behaviour. He falls in love with her and assumes that she also loves him. In the last, he knew that Sarmila was going to be married to another person and his conception was wrong.

Besides these, another problem of women arising in society is also tried to portray in the said story. In underdeveloped societies like the Bodo community where the literacy rate is very low, it was difficult for highly educated women to get married to persons of the desired status. On the other hand, the dependable character of girls grown for the extreme love of their parents is seen in '*Mam Daudwi*' by Nilkamal Brahma.

In '*Dumphauni Phitha*' by Janil Kr. Brahma, the attitude of women who try to make themselves financially established is portrayed through the character of Dumphau. She started a shop of local handmade rice cakes with a few amounts of investment to fulfil the requirements of the family without depending on her husband's earning. Later, her business grew and became financially sound. The same theme of the story is elaborated in '*Thangkhi*' of Uttara Basumatary. The tragic life of weak and helpless widow who is tried to be molestation is delineated in another short story '*Anwi Anaisrini Usunda*' by Janil Kr. Brahma. The naughty character of the girls whose activities can blame the name of society is elaborated in '*Srimuti Durlai*' of Haribhushan Brahma. The voice against oppression and philosophy of women's life is sketched in the short story of Mina Kherkhatary.

#### 1.4.7 Women writers in Bodo literature and their philosophy:

The Bodo women are not only represented in literature as textual characters but also appear as composers or authors. In the development of Bodo literature, the contribution of the women writer cannot be ignored. In early stage, though limited numbers of women were engaged in literary activities, today it has increased to a large number. Their writing technique, art of storytelling, style of expression, selection of theme, and subject matter are being developed and satisfactory. Their involvement in literature can be found in different genres of literature.

Today, there are so many women poets in Bodo literature. Among them, some could achieve state and national awards like 'Sahitya Akademy' for their amazing and beautiful creation. Name of some famous Bodo poets are Horeswary Brahma, Renu Boro, Romela Islary, Anju Narzary, Uttara Basumatary, Mina Kherkhatary, Dr. Indira Boro, Anjali Daimary, Binita Uzir and others. Rashmi Choudhury achieved Sahitya Akademy award for her poetry book '*Sansrini Modira*' in 2022.

The appearance of women as writers of short stories could be seen in the modern era of Bodo literature which is assumed as started after the birth of Bodo Sahitya Sabha in 1952. Women's appearance in the field of Bodo short story started by Lilabati Brahma's '*Gwswni Daha*'. Besides her, prominent short story writers of Bodos are- Joymati Brahmagiri, Beauti Basumatary, Rani Helen, Pramila Narzary, Mina Kherkhatary, Self Made Rani Boro, Rita Boro, Rupali Swargiary, Uttara Basumatary and many others.

There are so many women writers who have composed prose and criticism. Some of them are- Priyadini Brahma, Swarna Prabha Chainary, Indira Boro, Ruphasri Hazowary, Simani Boro, Laishri Mohilary, Bhubani Baglary, Rahel Mochary, Asharani Brahma, Pratima Brahma, Renu Boro etc.

Mina kherkhatary's name is found as the first woman novelist in the history of Bodo literature. She wrote the novel named '*Gwrwni Rodai*' based on the theme of women's grief. After that '*Sonani Ashtham*' of Propela Brahma in 2002, '*Phelengni Saogari*' of Sansumwi Kungri Basumatary in 2010, and '*Onthai Bikha*' of Anima Basumatary in 2017 etc. were published. In those novel, general problems of the women that arise during livelihood were portrayed but ignored the feminist thought. Besides those, there are some women novelists involving in the task. Among them- Rita Boro, Pratima Nandi Narzary, Sohaisuli Brahma, Anima Basumatary, Rimba Basumatary and others.

Besides those genres, women's contribution could be found in field of child literature, translation, and writing of language and linguistics books. It is seen that some women writers created child literature bearing the role of mother. They tried to give good advice and impart moral education to the children through their writing. Some Bodo women writers also engaged in the translation of books from other developed literature to Bodo. Through this work, they are contributing to filling the necessity of books that subjects have yet not been written by their writers. Involving in this work, women translators like Pramila Narzary, Anjali Daimary, Swarna Prabha Chainary, Indira Boro have achieved Sahitya Akademy award so far. In this way, a remarkable number of language and linguistics book writers (female) also available in Bodo literature.

In many genres of the above-mentioned, though women emerged lately in comparison to men, their representation as writers is satisfactory. They offer new perspectives on women's lives challenging the societal bad norms and traditions. The equal rights and freedom, the feeling of women to be free from male dominance etc. are expressed in their writing across various genres so that the strategies could be taken to uncover them from society. However, many of them have not chosen the subject matter of feminism in writing so far. They tried only to interpret general and common problems women faced during their way of life like domestic violence and gender discrimination etc. but did not raise a strong voice on the rights and freedom of women. The tragic life story of poor women or girls dominated by wealthy family members as maidservants or slaves who tolerated silently all the cruelty treated by owners is portrayed in their writings, but the way to get rid of such situations or evolve against them is not shown.

#### 1.5.8 Conclusion:

The representation of women in Bodo literature has undergone significant transformation over the years. From traditional roles in folklore and early prose to complex, empowered characters in contemporary writings, Bodo literature reflects the evolving status and aspirations of women in Bodo society. The increasing participation of women writers has further enriched these literary traditions, bringing diverse perspectives and voices to the forefront. As Bodo literature continues to evolve, it

remains a vital medium for exploring and advocating for gender equality and women's rights. The future of women's representation in Bodo literature looks promising. With more women getting access to education and the influence of global feminist movements, the portrayal of women in Bodo literature is likely to become even more diverse and inclusive. Emerging writers are expected to continue challenging traditional norms and creating works that reflect the complexities and aspirations of modern Bodo women. This ongoing evolution will not only enrich Bodo literature but also contribute to the broader discourse on gender equality and women's rights in India and beyond.

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