



Research Article

Exploration of Feminist Epistemology and Representation of Women in Assamese Literature and Cinema

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ABSTRACT: *This research critically explores the intersection of feminist epistemology and women's representation in Assamese literature and cinema. Through a critical analysis of various literary works and cinematic representations, the paper seeks to understand how women's knowledge, experiences, and voices have been marginalized and silenced in Assamese society. By examining the contributions of prominent Assamese writers and filmmakers, this study highlights the evolving feminist consciousness in Assam and its impact on the representation of women. The findings suggest that while early narratives support patriarchal norms, contemporary works are reshaping perspectives, contributing to feminist discourse in Assam. By analyzing literary and cinematic trends, this study highlights the ongoing struggle for gender-equitable knowledge production and representation. The paper also discusses the role of feminist epistemology in challenging traditional knowledge systems and advocating for the recognition of women's experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge.*

KEYWORDS: *Feminist Epistemology, Patriarchal Society, Situated Knowledge, Gender Inequality, Women's Empowerment, Women's Rights.*

INTRODUCTION

Feminist epistemology challenges the traditional exclusion of women as agents of knowledge and advocates for recognizing women's experiences as valid and significant. This paper aims to examine the feminist consciousness reflected in Assamese literature and cinema, focusing on how women's voices, emotions, and experiences have been represented, marginalized, and, in some cases, reclaimed. By examining the works of notable Assamese writers and filmmakers, this paper seeks to understand the role of feminist epistemology in shaping the discourse on gender, power, and knowledge in Assam.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to critically examine the intersection of feminist epistemology and the representation of women in Assamese literature and cinema. By analyzing key literary works and films, the research seeks to explore how women's voices, experiences, and knowledge have been historically marginalized and how evolving feminist consciousness has influenced gender portrayals. The study also aims to highlight the role of feminist epistemology in challenging traditional knowledge systems, advocating for the recognition of women's

experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge, and assessing the impact of these representations on societal perceptions of gender roles in Assam.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist Epistemology and Its Theoretical Framework

Defining Feminist Epistemology:

Feminist epistemology is concerned with understanding how gender influences our concepts of knowledge, the knowing subject, and practices of inquiry and justification. It emphasizes that knowledge is situated and shaped by individuals' social locations, experiences, and perspectives. Traditional epistemology has often excluded women as knowers, thereby marginalizing their experiences and perspectives. Feminist epistemology seeks to rectify this by acknowledging that women's experiences are crucial to the production of knowledge (Harding, 1987). Biology, medicine, history, and the economy have systematically ignored women's work, their bodies, and life experiences nevertheless women's experience is related to their daily activities like cooking, cleaning, and taking care of families. From this experience, they have been able to gain particular knowledge and a special set of skills. These practicing activities also help us to express emotions like how to act and handle a particular situation emotionally as per its demand.

Theories of Feminist Epistemology:

Feminist epistemology encompasses various theoretical perspectives, including feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory, and feminist postmodernism. These theories critique the male-dominated practices of knowledge production and advocate for a more inclusive and equitable approach.

- Feminist Empiricism emphasizes the importance of experience as a resource for developing knowledge, arguing that knowledge is a communal endeavor rather than an individual one.
- Feminist Standpoint Theory highlights the epistemological biases that disadvantage women, proposing that women's unique social positions provide them with a distinct and valuable standpoint for understanding the world.
- Feminist Postmodernism critiques the essentialist notions of gender and promotes the idea of multiplicity and plurality in understanding women's experiences.

Situated Knowledge:

Situated knowledge, a key concept in feminist epistemology, asserts that all knowledge is shaped by the knower's social, historical, and cultural context. This challenges the notion of universal, objective knowledge by recognizing that perspectives vary based on individual experiences (Anderson, 2017). Traditional epistemology has often ignored women's perspectives, supporting a male-dominated understanding of knowledge production. Hundleby (2011) argues that feminist empiricism challenges this exclusion by recognizing knowledge as a collective endeavor shaped by gendered experiences. This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of Assamese society, where women's lived experiences have historically been undervalued, limiting their role in knowledge creation. Situated knowledge in feminist epistemology emphasizes how social identities (e.g., gender, race, class) and roles shape access to information and the representation of knowledge. Gender plays a significant role in this process, as societal norms assign specific responsibilities (e.g. leadership for men, child-rearing for women) and prescribe behaviors, such as assertiveness for men and modesty for women. Traits deemed virtuous in one gender may be viewed negatively in another, and behaviors often

shift based on context. Gender identity, whether aligned or misaligned with societal expectations, further influences knowledge production. Additionally, spaces, objects, and roles are often symbolically gendered (e.g., kitchens as feminine, garages as masculine), demonstrating how gendered norms and symbolism impact epistemological processes and the way knowledge is understood.

Representation of Women in Assamese Literature

Historical Context:

Assamese literature has a rich tradition, but it has often reflected the patriarchal values that dominate Assamese society. Feminist standpoint theory, as conceptualized by Gurung (2021), asserts that marginalized groups develop unique perspectives on power and oppression due to their lived experiences. This is evident in the writings of Nirupama Borgohain, Mamoni Raisom Goswami, and others, whose works challenge patriarchal narratives by highlighting women's struggles and agency. Analyzing their literature through a feminist epistemological lens provides deeper insight into how Assamese women resist societal constraints.

Chandraprabha Saikiani in "Abhiyatri":

Nirupama Borgohain's novel, *Abhiyatri* (1946) presents the life of Chandraprabha Saikiani, a revolutionary woman who challenges the patriarchal norms of Assamese society. Saikiani's struggle and success in establishing a movement for liberty and revolution in Assam serve as a powerful example of feminist resistance (Gohain, 2020). Chandraprabha Saikiani was one of the pioneers in the field of social activism, especially the rights of women. She emerged from the obscurity of a remote Assamese Village to register many triumphs for the oppressed and the victimized including persecuted women like herself. Chandraprabha, not only fights for her dignity but also awakens the whole Assamese women regarding their deprived status.

Sheela Borthakur's "Lekhikar Jivani":

In *Lekhikar Jivani* (Lives of the Female Writers, 1993), Sheela Borthakur highlights the challenges faced by female writers in Assam, such as Hemlata Dutta and Sneha Devi. These women struggled against social oppression and familial expectations that prioritized domestic duties over education and personal development (Borthakur, 1993). This shows how educated women were often viewed with suspicion, as their education was perceived as a threat to the established gender norms.

Mamoni Raisom Goswami's Feminist Perspective:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami, a prominent Assamese writer, has been a vocal critic of the societal structures that oppress women. Her works, such as *Adhalekha Dastavej* (1998) and *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (2004), focus on issues like widowhood, marriage, and the struggles of women in a patriarchal society. Goswami's portrayal of women as complex, autonomous individuals who resist societal norms is a significant contribution to feminist literature in Assam.

Nirupama Borgohain's Contribution to Feminist Literature:

Nirupama Borgohain is another influential figure in Assamese literature who has consistently highlighted the struggles of women in a patriarchal and capitalist society. Her writings emphasize the psychological and epistemic aspects of women's lives, advocating for socialistic feminism and the need for women to support each other's development (Nath, 2020; Bania, 2015).

Feminist Epistemology in Assamese Cinema

Assamese Cinema: A Reflection of Patriarchal Values

Assamese cinema, like its literary counterpart, has often depicted women in roles that reinforce traditional gender norms. According to Gledhill (2010), women in cinema are frequently portrayed through a male-centric lens that limits their agency. Early films like *Joymati* (1935) depicted Assamese women as silent, submissive figures, reflecting societal expectations of women's behavior.

Evolution of Female Representation in Cinema:

Over time, Assamese cinema began to explore more complex representations of women. Films like *Ganga Chilonir Pankhi* (1976) and *Sandhyarag* (1977) by filmmakers like Padum Barua and Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia focused on the struggles of women in a patriarchal society. These films highlight the societal pressures faced by women, particularly widows, and their efforts to assert their autonomy. Dutt (2018) argues that regional Indian cinema has transitioned from depicting women as silent victims to depicting them as active agents, reshaping their on-screen roles. This shift is evident in Assamese cinema as it gradually moves towards more refined female characters who challenge traditional norms.

Contemporary Assamese Cinema and Feminist Consciousness:

Contemporary Assamese filmmakers like Manju Borah have furthered the feminist discourse in cinema. Her film *Akashitorar Kathare* (2003) tells the story of an educated woman who sacrifices her career for her family, shedding light on the societal expectations that continue to limit women's choices. The film *Aideu* (2006) by Arup Manna explores the life of Aideo Handique, the first Assamese film actress, and the social stigma she faced for her involvement in the film industry (Dutta, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach to study how women are represented in Assamese society through literature and films. It includes analyzing Assamese literary works by female authors and feminist scholars to identify common themes about gender.



Figure 1: Concept Map of Feminist Epistemology

It also examines Assamese films to understand how women's roles and societal expectations are portrayed. A comparison of past and present depictions helps assess changes and ongoing biases. Additionally, the study reviews scholarly articles and research papers to support its findings.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of Assamese literature and cinema reveals significant trends in the representation of women and the development of feminist consciousness. The findings are categorized as follows:

Transformation in Cinematic Representation

- While early films like *Joymati* (1935) reinforced patriarchal norms, contemporary Assamese films, such as *Aideu* (2006) and *Akashitorar Kathare* (2003), portray women as independent and resilient.
- The rise of female filmmakers has contributed to more diverse and detailed representations of women's lives and struggles.

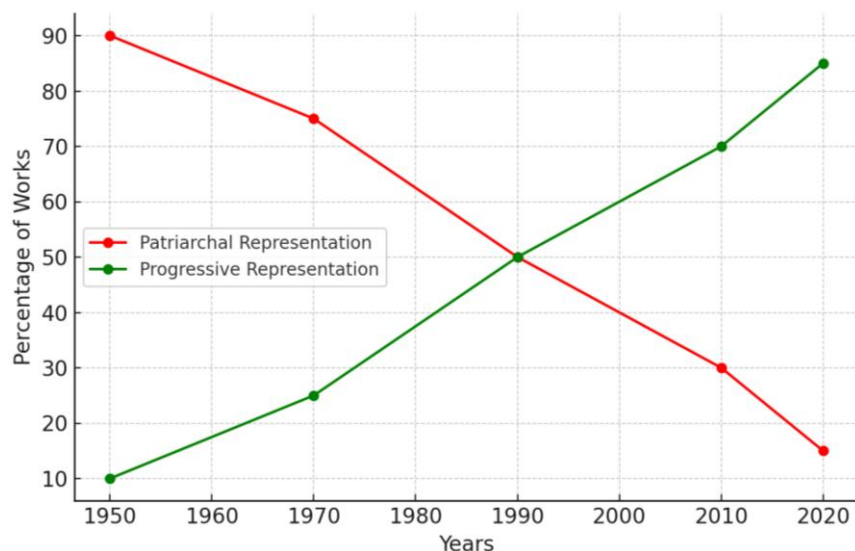


Figure 2: Timeline of Female Representation in Assamese Literature and Cinema (1950–2020)

Marginalization of Women's Voices

- Early Assamese literature and cinema primarily depicted women in submissive roles, emphasizing their responsibilities as caregivers and homemakers.
- Women's perspectives were often overshadowed by male-centric narratives, limiting their representation as autonomous individuals.

Emerging Feminist Consciousness

- The writings of Mamoni Raisom Goswami, Nirupama Borgohain, and Sheela Borthakur show a gradual shift towards feminist themes, questioning patriarchal norms.
- Films like *Ganga Chilonir Pankhi* (1976) and *Sandhyarag* (1977) highlighted the social struggles of women, particularly widows.

The above findings indicate that Assamese literature and cinema have played a crucial role in both upholding and challenging traditional gender norms. A detailed analysis of these trends is provided below:

Feminist Epistemology in Assamese Literature

The concept of situated knowledge suggests that women's experiences shape unique perspectives that have historically been overlooked. The selected literary works highlight this:

Literary Work	Author	Theme	Impact
Abhiyatri	Nirupama Borgohain	Women's Resistance	Raised awareness of women's rights
Lekhikar Jivani	Sheela Borthakur	Struggles of Female Writers	Highlighted systemic barriers
Adhalekha Dastavej	Mamoni Raisom Goswami	Widowhood & Social Norms	Challenged gender stereotypes
The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker	Mamoni Raisom Goswami	Patriarchy & Oppression	Critiqued patriarchal norms

These works demonstrate how literature has evolved to recognize women's voices as legitimate sources of knowledge, aligning with feminist standpoint theory, which argues that marginalized individuals provide unique insights into social structures.

Feminist Epistemology in Assamese Cinema

A comparison of traditional versus contemporary portrayals in cinema shows a clear shift in gender representations:

Traditional vs. Contemporary Portrayal of Women		
Aspect	Traditional Representation	Contemporary Representation
Role in Society	Homemakers, caregivers	Independent, professional, resistant
Themes Explored	Obedience, sacrifice	Agency, empowerment, resistance
Films & Literature	Joymati, Abhiyatri	Aideu, Akashitorar Kathare

A timeline of Assamese cinema also highlights this evolution:

Decade	Key Films	Themes
1930s - 1950s	Joymati	Submissive Women, Sacrifice
1960s - 1980s	Ganga Chilonir Pankhi, Sandhyarag	Widowhood, Gender Oppression
1990s - 2010s	Akashitorar Kathare, Aideu	Women's Struggles, Social Stigma
2020s - Present	Village Rockstars, Bulbul Can Sing	Feminist Resistance, Modern Identity

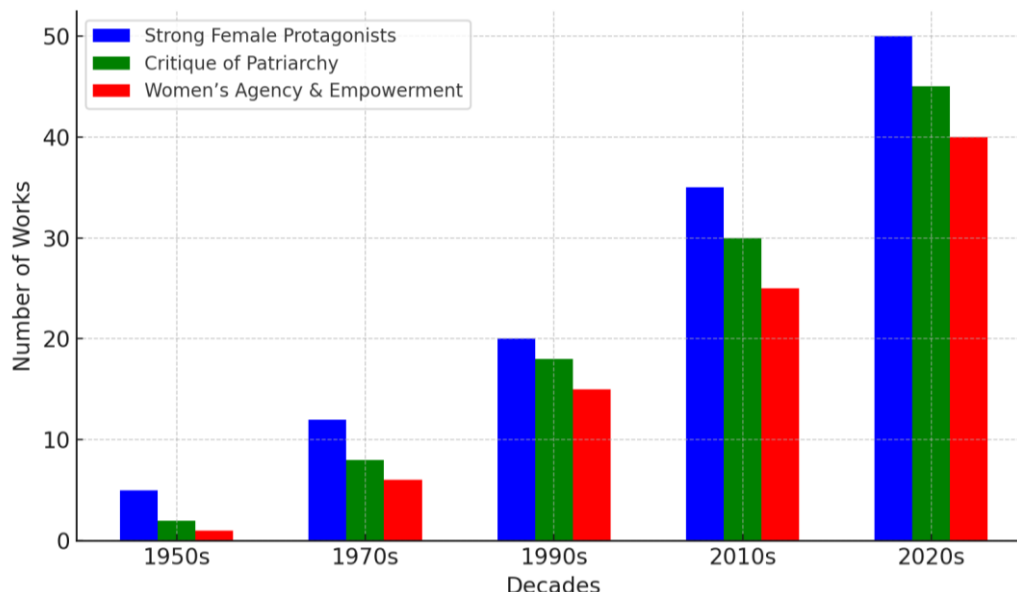


Figure 3: Feminist Themes in Assamese Literature & Cinema Over Decades

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Encouraging More Female Authors and Filmmakers:** Increasing participation of women in creative fields will contribute to diverse representations.
- **Promoting Gender-Inclusive Narratives:** Literature and films should aim to present balanced portrayals of both genders.
- **Integration of Feminist Scholarship:** The inclusion of feminist theories in academic discourse on Assamese literature and cinema can promote critical awareness.
- **Policy-Level Interventions:** Government and cultural institutions should support feminist literature and cinema to create an equitable platform for female narratives.

CONCLUSION

This research critically explores the intersection of feminist epistemology and women's representation in Assamese literature and cinema. Through an in-depth analysis of literary and cinematic works, it highlights how women's voices have been historically marginalized and how evolving feminist consciousness has influenced gender portrayals. The findings reveal that early narratives advanced patriarchal norms, whereas contemporary works challenge and reshape perspectives, contributing to feminist discourse in Assam. By examining these trends, the study underscores the ongoing struggle for gender-equitable knowledge production and representation. The contributions of feminist writers and filmmakers have played a crucial role in transforming societal attitudes, emphasizing the need for continued academic engagement with feminist epistemology to enhance a more inclusive understanding of gender in knowledge production.

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