Children's Literature in Assam: A Study

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the thesis entitled "**Children's Literature in Assam: A Study**" is the result of research carried out by me in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, under the supervision of Prof. Rohini Mokashi-Punekar, Professor in English in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences. The research findings and the information derived have been acknowledged duly with necessary citations and a list of references provided.

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Certificate

This is to certify that the research work for the thesis entitled "**Children's Literature in Assam: A Study**", submitted by Himaxee Bordoloi for the award of Doctor of Philosophy at the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, was carried out under my supervision. No part of it was submitted or presented to any other institution for a degree or a diploma.

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Contents

Abstract

Children's Literature in Assam: A Study

Although children's literature has gained considerable currency in the West in the recent decades, it receives very little scholarly consideration in India, and in regional literatures of India. In Assam, apart from a few scattered articles across newspapers and journals, book-length scholarly studies on children's literature are almost non-existent. It is against this backdrop that this thesis attempts to undertake a critical study of children's literature emerging from the Indian state of Assam, focusing on its formative period in the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century. The study also examines a few recent cinematic adaptations that pick up issues from and resonate with this body of literature.

A unique impact of British colonialism in Assam was the perceived loss of a distinct language and cultural ethos of the land, as the region of Assam was subsumed within the larger Bengal province soon after the colonial conquest. The historical trauma of colonialism in Assam eventually gave rise to a sentiment of cultural nationalism which was particularly discernible in its literature for children. The study attempts to examine how children's literature, in this regard, served as a discursive entity to inculcate a sense of a distinct cultural identity in the attempt to envision and shape the Assamese nation. The primary goal of the study, therefore, is to foreground the cultural discourses that inform the evolution of children's literature as a distinctive genre during the colonial era in Assam. The second goal, however, is to bring current perspectives in literary scholarship on the broad topic of children's literature into conversation with what came to be understood as the canonical works of children's literature in Assam. By setting up a dialogue between the selected texts and current critical scholarship, the thesis attempts to highlight how these stories are entwined with issues now understood as ableism, sexism, and other 'dark' aspects. Such an exploration would enable

key insights into ideological and cultural formulations that are entrenched and eventually perpetuated through literature for children.

One of the socio-cultural biases ingrained in tales for children in Assam is the ableist bias. In order to see how stories/tales have functioned to 'entrench the idea of the disabled' in the cultural context of Assam, the present study attempts to locate the discursive and ideological regimes of ableism in the world of folk narratives by borrowing theoretical insights from the cultural models of disability.

There is no denying the fact that colonial modernity brought in its wake devastating and debilitating impact on the ecology of the region. The thesis undertakes a study of animality in the twentieth-century children's literature from Assam, deploying critical inputs from animality studies and critical posthumanism. It particularly attempts to see how fantasy narratives of certain writers such as Navakanta Barua and Atul Chandra Hazarika consciously attempt to subvert the ‘speciesist’ colonial ideologies by blurring the boundaries between humans and animals.

Most of the characters from the corpus of the folk and fairy tales from Assam are also subject to social inequalities owing to their gender or class location. The study in this regard, attempts to examine the representation of violence in varied forms—physical, structural, symbolic, and epistemic in children's literature through the examples of folk and fairy tales from Assam. The thesis attempts to address the issue of ‘violence’ in the light of editorial intervention and self-censorship in order to discern the violent and darker elements entrenched in the tales.

The current study specifically attempts to examine fantasy literature from Assam in its varied forms—folktales, fairy tales, supernatural fiction, and wonder tales. It attempts to offer fresh perspectives in understanding this body of literature through the lens of perspectives evolved from current developments in critical thought, that afford crucial means of engaging

with issues of gender, disability, animality, and violence. Connecting the idea of children's literature as a cultural capital, the study examines how the broad spectrum of children's fantasy narratives from Assam has larger socio-cultural implications. A critical inquiry into the *sadhu katha* lends the possibility of examining how such a body of literature provides glimpses of the cultural ethos of a distinct Assamese society thereby acting as a signifier of Assamese-ness. At the same time, the study also attempts to highlight how children's literature as cultural capital, particularly at a formative stage, runs the risk of reinforcing and/or perpetuating socio-cultural biases for generations to come.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Stories may not actually breathe, but they can animate. (Arthur Frank, 2010)

Story is one of the most serious intruders into the heart. (Jane Yolen, 25)

I

Tales of wonder and imagination, of the grotesque and the eerie, of instruction and of delight are intrinsic to all cultures across the globe. Kimberley draws our attention to the significance of stories in shaping our perception and cognition by emphasizing that, "stories are the key sources of images, vocabularies, attitudes, structures, and explanations…they can be important carriers of information about changes in culture, present and past" (*Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction* 4). A similar view is reflected in Seth Lererin's observation that "the history of children's literature is inseparable from the history of childhood, for the child was made through texts and tales he or she studied, heard, and told back" (*A Reader's* 1). Lerer's remark reflects the importance of story-telling in oral traditions and pre-literate societies; tales that were subsequently documented and which helped in the formation of a written body of literature for children.

Although children's literature has gained considerable currency in the West in the recent decades, it receives very little scholarly consideration in India, and in regional literatures of India. For a long time, children's literature as a genre was perceived to be a 'soft reading' option. Fortunately, 'the Harry Potter phenomenon' since about two decades ago has led to a paradigm shift in our understanding of children's literature. The Harry Potter series, along with a few other well-known books, has spurred the interest of the reading public (both children and adults) in the category today understood as children's literature. Concurrently, the emergence of disciplines like Cultural Studies, Animal Studies, Posthumanism, and Gender Studies has

opened up new vistas in the scholarship on children's literature. The growing interest in popular culture has opened up an industry of 'children's content' and fuelled the growth, to a certain extent, of academic research in children's literature. From the growing numbers of fantasy narratives from Hollywood to the flooding of popular Disney character toys in markets, the current cultural scenario is engulfed with products emanating from the commodification of children's entertainment.

However, children's literature in Assam continues to be at a nascent stage. While publishing houses based in India have published home-grown folklore and mythology for children, original works published for children are fewer in number. Interestingly, although the Assamese readership is relatively lower in terms of absolute figures compared to other states of India, it has the highest per capita number of children's books published (Subramanium 30). The number tellingly reflects the scenario of an emerging body of children's literature in Assam, also indicating a real need for research in the area. It is against this backdrop that this thesis attempts to examine children's literature in Assam, discuss its key features and postulate new directions for inquiry.

Defining children's literature

The term "Children's Literature" is an unstable category that often leads to contentious debates in academia. What makes the term ambiguous is its very nature as a category of literature. Although outside academia the term children's literature embodies everything from newspaper content to picture books, for the scholars and teachers of children's literature the term is often fraught with complications. Defining the category of children's literature is in itself problematic to academicians and researchers in the field. As the critic Karin Lesnik Oberstein points out:

> the definition of 'children's literature' lies at the heart of its endeavour: it is a category of books the existence of which absolutely depends on supposed relationship with a particular reading audience: children… But is a children's book a book written by children, or for children? And crucially: what does it mean to write a book 'for' children? If it is a book written 'for children', is it then still a children's book if it is (only) read by adults? What of 'adult' books read also by children—are they children's literature? (*Defining* 15).

These ontological questions addressed above reflect the difficulty in arriving at any neat categorization or definition of children's literature. The subject of children's literature is, therefore, an ambivalent subject that has acquired a variety of meanings in the academic sphere. Despite the several issues involved, scholars may perhaps come to a consensus with regard to defining the subject. However, more serious problems are posed when it comes to defining the 'child' – the recipient of children's literature. Jacqueline Rose addresses the complications that arise while considering the conceptual category of the 'child'. She argues that:

> Children's fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple. It as an idea whose innocent generality covers up a multitude of sins… Peter Pan stands in our culture as a monument to the impossibility of its own claims—that it represents the child, speaks to and for children, addresses them as a group which is knowable and exists for the book (*Defining* 17).

In her argument, Rose has taken a radical stance by pointing out that "the 'child' is a construction invented for the needs of the authors of children's literature, and not an 'observable objective scientific entity". Claims such as Rose's cannot be fully concretized by writers for children and the critics because the very existence of the subject rests on the 'child'

(construction or not) and “all their work is ostensibly on this child’s behalf” (17). Nevertheless, Rose’s claim points to the ambiguity of children’s literature as a large field of study. As Kimberley observes, “in truth, there is no clearly identifiable body of children’s literature any more than there is something that could be called ‘adults' literature' … Both reflect ideas of the purpose, nature, and modes of writing at any given moment; they share a technology, a distribution system” (21). Despite the varied and contentious meanings, the phrase 'children's literature' is widely used by readers and academics alike. Notwithstanding various attempts to define children's literature, critics have arrived at a consensus regarding the subject matter or scope of children's literature. What actually counts as children's literature in the contemporary scenario is examined by Kimberley in his *Children’s Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (2011). He states:

> Currently, everything from folk and fairy tales, myths and legends, ballads and nursery rhymes—many of which date back to preliterate epochs—to such embodiments of our transliterate age as e-books, fan fiction, and computer games may come under the umbrella of children’s literature. Additionally, as an area of research and teaching, children’s literature encompasses all genres, formats, and media; all periods, movements, and kinds of writing from any part of the world, and often related ephemera and merchandise too. It addresses works that were specifically directed at the young, those that came to be regarded as children’s literature by being appropriated by young readers (313).

This long yet insightful definition reflects a pluralistic outlook of contemporary children's literature. His observation that "there is no single, coherent, fixed body of work that makes up children's literature, but instead many children's literatures produced at different times in different ways for different purposes by different kinds of people using different formats and media" (21) further validates his views. However, what binds these different cultures is

ultimately the ‘assumption of the child as a generic universality’. In assuming the child as a universal subject, this study does not intend to repudiate the claims of critics that children are divided by class, caste, race, ethnic origin, gender, and so on. Neither does it disclaim the understanding that the supposed audience of children's literature: 'children', varies even in age. Notwithstanding the differences, it is still worth accepting that children across the globe share a common propensity for imagination, which can be widened through children's literature. The imagination which governs children’s books, therefore, not only enhances the creativity of young readers, but also helps in expanding their critical faculty.

Considering the pedagogical implications of children’s literature in igniting the creative spirit, and thereby, fostering what Landsberg says ‘a sense of wonderful complexity of life’ (qtd. in *Understanding Children’s Literature* 16) it is therefore, necessary to conduct a critical study of this body of literature: particularly, such texts which are underrepresented and undertheorized.

Reorienting the locus Eastwards

From John Newbery’s *A Little Pretty-pocket Book* (1744) to Neil Gaiman’s popular works for children such as *Caroline* (2002) and *Pirate Stew* (2020), children’s literature has come a long way in the West- so much so that it has come to represent “a universal symbol of childhood and adolescence” (Gabriel and Wilson). Notwithstanding the growing popularity and larger appeal of Anglophone children’s literature the fact cannot be ignored that the perception of childhood as a distinctive and separate category with specific needs and interests is itself a relatively recent development in the West- as noted in the works of Philip Aries’ *Centuries of Childhood* (1960). The very need for children's books (literature) stems from the theoretical postulates of Locke and Rousseau who foreground the 'idealisation of childhood' in eighteenth-century England. Contrastingly, rooted in closely-knit family systems, childhood in India had

always been idealised, although the adoration was most often reserved for the male child. The 'eulogizing literature' produced during the Bhakti cult from the Indian state of Assam during the fifteenth-century witnesses the fact that Assam had a long and rich tradition of child-centric literature. As Pallavi Jha notes in her article "Folktale to Realism: Bezbaroa's Literature for Children":

> Assamese children's literature can be said to have begun in the Vaishnavite period. Sankardev and Madhavdev wrote about Krishna's leela as a child…Sridhar Kandali's *Kankhowa Kavya* which sings about Krishna leela is a text which is a Vaishnavite version of an Assamese lullaby and can be fully appealing to a child as well. Similarly, *Bhim Charit* of Ram Saraswati is a mock-heroic narrative with humour can also be appealing to the child sentiment (244).

Sankardeva's *Sisulila*, Madhavdev's *Chordhora* and Sridhar Kandali's *Kankhowa* all of which were written during the Vaishnavite movement in Assam, glorify the deeds and pranks of child Krishna. Written eloquently with sonorous rhythm and melody, these poems appealed to the young children of the times as much as they captivated the devout elders. In this regard, Khagendra Nath Talukdar, a distinguished critic of Assamese children's literature, considers Sankardev's *Kartala Kamal Kamaladala Nayan*, a devotional verse that he composed at the early age of twelve without the use of any vowels, except the first 'a' to be the first instance of written literature for children in Assam (*Asom Sishu Sahitya Kux* 220). The details outlined above accentuate the fact that despite having a rich tradition of child-centric literature in India, the case of Indian, and more specifically children's literature in Assam, to put in the words of Stuart Hall remains "a case of the unspoken, Europe was a case of that which is endlessly speaking" (qtd. in *Critical Pedagogy* 28). The move, therefore, is to reorient the locus toward the East, considering the under-representation of children's literature in the region. Keeping such a framework in view, the present study attempts to undertake a critical study of children's

literature emerging from the Indian state of Assam, focusing on its formative period in the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century. The study also examines a few films from the contemporary period in alignment with issues ranging from the aforesaid body of literature. The primary goal of the study is to foreground the cultural discourses that informed the history of children's literature as a distinctive genre during the colonial era in Assam. The second goal, however, is to bring current perspectives on children's literary scholarship into conversation with what came to be understood as the canonical works of children's literature in Assam. Such an exploration would draw key insights into the ideological and cultural formulations that get comprehended and eventually perpetuated through literature for children.

II

Cultural nationalism and children's literature in Assam

Radhika Menon, the founder of the children's publishing house named Tulika Books made a very significant remark about the origin of children's literature in India. Menon says, "the historical circumstances of the colonizers created the conditions for the growth of the most vibrant body of children's literature in India" (Menon). Although literature for young children prevailed in India right from ancient times in the form of oral story-telling and written verse as mentioned earlier, Menon rightly asserts that colonialism provided fertile terrain for the growth and development of a distinct genre of children's literature in India. Interestingly, the rise of children's literature in India concurs with the inception of several 'nations' within the macro nation of India. The close connection between nation and children's literature is observed by Christopher Kelen and Bjorn Sundmark in their book, *The Nation in Children's Literature*:

> Nation and childhood are intimately connected through children's literature. It is for this reason children's literature tends to stay at home, securely rooted in a national context

> and culturally specific perceptions of childhood… Thus, children's literature is, as we see it, a key instrument of culture connecting child and nation, and defining their relationship. The manner in which children and childhood are represented in a dedicated literature will affect a nation's self-understanding; conversely, the way a nation wishes to see itself will have a bearing on the possible ways in which children and childhood can and may be represented (4).

In the light of the above quotation, it can be argued that in a muti-cultural-linguistic-territory like colonial India, children's literature is informed by a sense of cultural nationalism- "a regional national consciousness emanated from a cultural sense of 'pre-existent nation' defined in terms of a distinct culture, shared history, specific language and common territory" ("Cultural Nationalism" 29). The close links between cultural nationalism and children's literature find realization, particularly in the context of colonial Assam- a period when the nation's distinct socio-cultural-linguistic identity was subsumed within the Bengal provincial unit. Jyortimoy Jana's elaborate discussion on Anandaram Dekhial Phukan's contribution to the making of the modern Assam in the book *Warp and Weft: Makers of Modern Assam*, throws some light on the contestations taking place during the period. As Jana says:

> Anandaram strongly vouched for the reintroduction of the Assamese language in the courts of Assam on the following grounds- i) the masses, and even private gentlemen did not possess knowledge of the language (Bengali), and ii) the Bengali language bore no close resemblance to Assamese than it did to Oriya, and if the courts of Orissa could be allowed the privilege to use the language of that land, there should not be any justification for withholding from the Assamese the privilege of using their mother tongue in the courts of their own land" (47).

It is against such backdrop of 'cultural fragmentation' and linguistic hegemony, a group of Assamese intellectuals, including Anandaram Dekhial Pkukan felt the urgency of creating an ambience for fostering the growth and development of what has become modern children's literature in Assam. In the face of the hegemonic power structure of not merely colonial authority, but also another native group, the Bengalis, a canon of children's literature was, therefore, consciously formed in Assam to formulate a discourse of cultural nationalism. Following Judith Butler, one is reminded of the "reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (*Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* 2). Although Butler's statement stems from the context of gender, her remark applies to the colonial context of Assam, where the natives reiterate the very discourses used by the colonizers to resist and subvert the hegemonic power structures of both the Western colonizers as well as the native Bengali group. In the light of Butler's statement, the second chapter of the study attempts to examine the connection between cultural nationalism and discursivity with regard to the newly emerging children's literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Assam. In doing so, the study plans to explore how children's literature in Assam plays a transformative role in not only defining a distinct 'Assamese' identity, but also in reclaiming the lost heritage of Assamese language and culture.

Children's literature as 'cultural capital' plays a pivotal role in not only valorizing a glorious cultural past, but it also bears the responsibility of perpetuating and/or reinforcing the distinctive values embedded in it. As Xu Daozhi observes in his book, *Indigenous Cultural Capital: Postcolonial Narratives in Australian Children's Literature* (2018):

> cultural capital in children's books consists of three fundamental aspects: first, the acquisition of desirable forms of knowledge, values, and ideologies through cumulative interactions between child readers and books; second, the incorporation of or writing about culture and knowledge so that they can be embodied and transmitted as cultural

> capital through books for children; third, institutional acts of legitimation, as an important means to formulate cultural capital, through which the writer's work (together with represented or incorporated cultural values and ideologies) can be recognized, disseminated, and preserved for generations of readers (*Cultural Capital* 14).

In the light of Daozhi's observation, it can be argued that if children's literature plays a significant role in 'formulating cultural capital' and more importantly in 'disseminating' it for 'generations of readers' then it is indeed worth reflecting on the social and cultural 'values' which get subsumed within cultural capital from a critical perspective. Kelen and Sundmark address the need to examine the ideological underpinnings of children's literature, particularly with a nationalistic consciousness, as such literature not only entails a cultural glory but it can "also be a carrier of stereotypical and conservative ideas" for the future citizens-to-be (*The Nation in Children's Literature* 4). The texts selected for this study (the majority of which are folktales) also attempt to instil a sense of national/cultural distinctiveness among the young children of the period. However, critical examination reveals that the selected literature under study is also not free from inconsistencies and socio-cultural bias. By setting up a dialogue between the selected texts and current critical scholarship, the thesis attempts to highlight how the stories are entwined with issues now understood as ableism, sexism, and other 'dark' aspects. Certain tales reflect the 'stereotypical and conservative ideas' of the distant pre-colonial world against which the stories are set: and, certain speciesist ideologies are filtered into the texts with the advent of colonial modernity. A critical inquiry into children's literature from Assam during the formative era becomes crucial, as the same body of literature as cultural capital runs the risk of reinforcing and/or perpetuating socio-cultural bias embedded in the texts for generations to come. Fortunately, while certain texts are fraught with ableist and sexist ideologies, there are other texts which combat and subvert the essentialist ideologies. The

challenge, therefore, is to identify texts with deeper pedagogical implications. In other words, as cultural capital which particular aspects of children's literature in Assam need to be highlighted? What are the aspects that need to be questioned and interrogated? A critical study of this sort opens up such issues to ponder.

III

Children's fantasy literature in Assam

Terri Windling, one of the eminent writers of fantasy literature, invokes Lloyd Alexander in one of her blog posts titled "Why we need Fantasy". Lloyd articulates, as Terri Windling quotes him, "now I think we see fantasy as an essential part of a balanced diet, not only for children but for adults too. The risks of keeping fantasy off the literary menu are every bit as serious as missing the minimum daily requirements of thiamine, niacin, and riboflavin. The consequences are spiritual malnutrition" (Windling). Following Lloyd, Winding argues how different forms of fantastical literature such as folktales, fairy tales, magic realism, mythic fiction, and others still have relevance in the present times in "exploring the infinities of our inner spirit, and re-imagining the world" (Windling). Critics from Jack Zipes to Terri Windling to Zoe Jacques argue how fantasy literature affords new ways to negotiate realities. As Jipes observes:

> It is through fantasy that we have always sought to make sense of the world, not through reason. Reason matters, but fantasy matters more… It is through the fictive projections of our imaginations based on personal experience that we have sought to grasp, explain, alter, and comment on reality…unlike reality, they allegedly open the mysteries of life and reveal ways in which we can maintain ourselves and our integrity in a conflict-ridden world. They compensate for the constant violation of nature and life itself and

> for the everyday violation of our lives engendered through spectacle. They contest reality and also become conflated with reality ("Why Fantasy Matters" 78).

To over-simplify Zipes' words, fantasy literature, though not necessarily 'real', helps readers in coming to terms with the real world. The writers of fantasy literature are, therefore, what Marianne Moore terms "literalists of the imagination"- someone who create "imaginary gardens with real toads in them" (qtd. in "The Reality of Imagination" 4). Fantasy literature today, as an established Western genre exercises extraordinary hold over children and young adult readers from across the globe. However, much of what has become children's fantasy literature owes its taproot to the folk and fairy tradition of the storyteller. In the Indian context, although modern fantasy fiction for children is still at a nascent stage (except for the mythology-inspired fantasy fiction) the region abounds with fantastic tales in the form of folk tales, fairy tales, wonder tales, myths, fables, and 'tales of the impossible'. As in other parts of the country, in Assam as well, story-telling occupies an important role in fostering childhood and children's perception of the real world. The generic term for a story or an oral tale, in Assam is *sadhu katha*- "a tale told by a wandering merchant" (Goswami 129). Gradually, the term *sadhu* was, however, used to refer to both oral and written literature for children. Most of the *sadhu katha* from Assam resonate with fantastic elements, although the setting for the tales is most often realistic. As Prafulladutta Goswami, the eminent folklorist from India observes:

> the Assamese storytellers is a world between fact and fantasy, and in this world, animals jostle with men, men talk with animals, and both men and animals find pleasure in outdoing others in wit and cleverness. It is a world where birds and beasts think like men and where things change their form whenever it is necessary. There is humor, horror, and pathos, and there is a beautiful weaving of fancy (Goswami 130).

Taking a cue from Goswami's observation, the current study attempts to examine fantasy literature from Assam in its varied forms- folktales, fairy tales, supernatural fiction, and wonder tales. This thesis attempts to offer fresh perspectives in understanding this body of literature through the lens of perspectives evolved from current developments in critical thought, that afford crucial means of engaging with issues of gender, disability, animality and violence. Connecting the idea of children's literature as a cultural capital as discussed earlier, the study examines how the broad spectrum of children's fantasy narratives from Assam has larger socio-cultural implications. A critical inquiry into the *sadhu katha* lends the possibility of examining how such a body of literature provides glimpses of the cultural ethos of a distinct Assamese society thereby acting as a signifier of Assamese-ness. At the same time, they also draw the attention of scholars to the fact that the narratives in themselves were not innocent, and they also, indeed, have subversive potential. As Sanjeev Kumar Nath observes in his *The World of Assamese Folktales*, "in the traditional society in which the folktales took shape, caste and class hierarchies were very oppressive. A person often felt disadvantaged owing to his class or his caste" (Nath 16). The tales, therefore, lend themselves to the possibility of myriad interpretations from perspectives of gender, disability, animality, and violence which have contemporary relevance. Cultural studies, as a critical theory, is primarily concerned with the concept of ideology. Stuart Hall defines it in "The Whites of their Eyes" as, "those images, concepts, and premises… through which we represent, interpret, understand and 'make sense' of some aspect of social existence" (qtd. in Dines 4, 2003). The study of ideology, is, therefore, crucial to literature because through "representations", literature plays an important role in reiterating and/or subverting certain ideologies, an argument made earlier in the context of cultural nationalism in Assam and the perpetuation of 'stereotypical ideas' through children's literature. To reiterate the point, it is imperative to explore issues of gender, disability, animality, and violence in the context of Assamese literary and cultural landscape; not only

because these are vibrant fields of critical inquiry, but because such a study will enrich and enlarge our understanding of 'subject formation' and 'subjugated knowledges' in the cultural context of Assam.

Gender in Folk and Fairy tales of Assam

According to Mary Ann Ferguson, women's subjectivity is confined to certain sexually defined roles such as 'mothers, good submissive wives, or bad dominating ones, seductresses, betrayers, prim single woman, or the inspiration for male artists" (qtd. in Dutta 9). Strikingly, most of the roles defined by Ferguson appear in folk tales across communities in Assam. For instance, Nandana Dutta, in her edited book *Mothers, Daughters and Others* (2012) examines the role of women in the folk narratives of Assam. Although Dutta's book does not exclusively talk about the representation of women in the Assamese children's literary corpus, most of the tales compiled in her book are popular among children. Her book is illuminating in the sense that it covers several tribal folk tales of Assam from the Bodo, Mising, Dimasa, Rabha, Tiwa, and Karbi communities besides 'mainstream' Assamese folk tales. According to Dutta, one common motif which appears in most of the tales is the representation of 'woman as an object of male desire'(21). The predominance of such 'gendered stereotypes' in folk tales are particularly alarming because folk tales perpetuate and disseminate established cultural values. As Cristina Bacchilega observes in her article, "An Introduction to the 'Innocent Persecuted Heroine' Fairy Tale", "folk narratives are sites of competing, historically and socially framed desires… they continue to play a privileged function in the reproduction of various social constructs, including gender and narrative" (11). In the light of Bacchilega's statement it is worth observing how the representations of women in certain folk and fairy tales of Assam help in retaining 'gendered ideology'. Jack Zipes in his book *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre* (2012) explores the socio-cultural dimension of fairy tales. He addresses some fundamental queries such as how are tales shaped by cultural patterns

and socio-environmental changes; and how such tales in turn can help in the socialization process of children. Commenting on the relevance of children's literature in retaining the codes of culture, Zipes opines that "It is the adult author's symbolically social act intended to influence and perhaps control the future destiny of culture. At its heart are notions of civility and civilization. Authors who write literature for children want to cultivate raw sensibilities, to civilize unruly passions, and to reveal unsocial forces hostile to civilization" (19). Drawing on Zipes' 'sociological dimension' of fairy tales it is imperative to ponder on the following issues: if children's literature helps in retaining the codes of culture, then what impact will the representations of 'gendered stereotypes' have on children? What is the role of writers, compilers, and storytellers in this regard? Do issues of editorial intervention and self-censorship play any role in reiterating the dominant gendered ideologies? Or does it help to consider such ideologies as 'unsocial forces' through their subversive potential? How does a female author differ from a male author in addressing gendered issues in her tales meant for children? Such gender-related queries shall be addressed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5 respectively.

Disability in Assamese Folk and Fairy tales

Lennard J Davis observes in his article "Introduction: Normality, Power, and Culture", "we live in a world of norms… to understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body…so, with the concept of the norm comes the concept of deviations or extremes. When we think of bodies, in a society where the concept of the norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants". ("Introduction: Normality, Power" 2-3). Folk and Fairy tales across cultures abound in characters termed as 'deviants.' Ann Schmiesing's *Disability, Deformity, and Disease in the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (2014) is worth mentioning in this context, ostensibly since it is the first book-length study of disability in fairy tales. Schmiesing's book talks about 'disability' and 'disease' in relation to the authors'

personal encounters with such conditions. Although, Schmiesing is successful in analysing representations of disability in certain tales like "The Maiden without Hands", "Hans My Hedgehog", she is primarily concerned with the lived bodily experience of disability of the authors themselves in relation to the tales. Schmiesing's analysis of disability can be extended to Assamese *sadhu katha* to address queries such as: How does Assamese society construct 'deviance' as a disability as represented in the *sadhu kathas?* What does a disabled character say about the existing 'norms' of Assamese community? Current theoretical debates on disability studies could be deployed to excavate disabled characters from the corpus of *sadhu katha*, and address queries such as why a certain sense of 'aesthetic nervousness' occurs when non-disabled characters meet a disabled character such as a *kona* (blind) or a *Kuja* (hunchback) or a *chawalpuria* (the obese man)? Or why is a character afflicted with night blindness (*Kukurikona)* always scared of visiting his in-laws at night time? Why do such characters pose a threat to society? Douglas C Baynton observes in his article "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History" (2013) "Disability has functioned historically to justify inequality for disabled people themselves, but it has also done so for women and minority groups. That is, not only has it been considered justifiable to treat disabled people unequally, but the concept of disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them" (Douglas 17). One persistent aspect of 'disability' is that it has always been used as a justification for inequality based on identities such as race, gender, ethnicity, etc. By focusing on the cultural model of disability which believes in 'contesting the context' which constructs disability, the present study attempts to locate the discursive and ideological regimes of ableism in the folk world of the narratives from Assam. Following Susan Peters who describes disability as a "thriving cross-cultural phenomenon that knows no national boundaries" (583) the present study attempts to examine how the folktales compiled by Bezbaroa and Trolekeswari Devi Baruani are replete with disabled characters such as

'*Ebegotia* (dwarf), *Bandori* (female monkey), *Kukurikona* (night-blindness) *Ou Kunwori* (elephant apple maiden) and others. The Hindu doctrine of *Karma* understands disability as just recompense- the retributive consequence of personal misdeeds in past lives. In this regard, people even with the least 'disability' are deemed 'inauspicious' in the Indian tradition because of their 'retributive fate' which threatens the normative social order. Employing Western models of disability, alongside the Indian religious attitude to disability, the study attempts to address certain queries such as: how do people branded as a 'bad omen' become ostracized because of their 'inescapable doom' manifested through their inherent 'inauspiciousness'? How is disability deployed to justify inequality among the characters of these folktales? Does deviation from male norms qualify women as socially disabled? What is the connection between disability and women? Such queries shall be addressed in chapter 3 and chapter 5 of this thesis.

Posthumanism and the Animal in Children's Fantasy Literature from Assam

Cary Wolfe, in his book *Before the Law: Human and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (2012) notes, "we need a new political vocabulary that will open politics to nonhuman subjects, which also necessarily entails opening politics to those who have been considered "less than human" by modern imperialist states" (qtd. in "Toward a Posthumanist Education" 42). The central claim of Posthumanism is that the figure of the human, as an innate superior rational being is a 'construct' of enlightenment humanist discourse. Ever since Donna Haraway published her ground-breaking study, *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) Posthumanism as a critical approach has begun to take shape. Haraway, in her manifesto, notes that humanism had always relied upon "clear distinctions between human and animal, organism and machine, and the physical and nonphysical, but a host of dramatic modern developments … had made such rigid, absolutist thinking unsustainable and politically dubious" (qtd. in Clarke, Rossinni 376). Children's literature as a critical area of study has always already been vested with humanist and Posthumanist philosophies. As Zoe Jacques states in her book *Animality and Children's*

Literature and Film (2015), "western philosophy's objective to establish a notion of an exclusively human subjectivity is continually countered in the very texts that ostensibly work to configure human identity" (4). Although Jacques is referring to the western canonical children's texts, her statement applies to children's literature from Assam as well. There is no denying the fact that colonial modernity had brought in its wake one of the most devastating effects on the ecology of Assam. As Arupjyoti Saikia notes in his book *Forest and Ecological History of Assam* (2011):

> in the mid-nineteenth century, the personnel of the East India Company had encountered the dense forests in various parts of Assam and had left behind their memoir of these landscapes. Many of them believed in the magnificence, astonishing nature, and enormity of these jungles. In the next century, neither the colonial nor the Assamese writers register a similar landscape. They now narrated the stories of ruthless intervention of various human agencies in the forest and how it was deprived of its proclaimed virginity (34).

One of the stories about the ruthless 'human intervention' in the ecology of Assam can be found in children's literature -particularly in the works of Navakanta Barua (1926-2002) and Atul Chandra Hazarika (1903-1986). The literature written for children by these writers condemns the massive exploitation of nature against the colonial backdrop and it also expresses a deep reverence for the non-human environment. Their fantasy narratives play a subversive role as the tales consciously attempt to subvert the speciesist colonial ideologies by blurring the boundaries between humans and animals. The works of these writers, therefore, reflect what is now understood as Posthuman sensibilities and they offer a possibility of interpretation from the perspective of what Donna Haraway terms as "Companion Species"- a relationship marked by mutual respect and affection among all species. Cary Wolfe suggests in his book *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species and Posthuman Theory* (2003), "much of

what we call cultural studies situates itself squarely, if only implicitly, on what looks . . . more and more like a fundamental repression that underlies most ethical and political discourse: repressing the question of nonhuman subjectivity, taking it for granted that the subject is always already human" (1). Wolf's essay on *Animal Rites* offers provocative grounds for enlarging the scope of Cultural Studies to 'nonhuman subjectivity' and addresses queries such as; is there any room for the 'animal' other in children's literature from Assam? Does children's literature in Assam attempt to subvert the human/animal binary? Is anthropomorphism a means of transmitting certain ideological notions to children? Pramod K Nayar argues in his book, *Posthumanism* (2013) that:

> critical posthumanism rejects the 'ableism' of traditional humanism to include variant bodies— such as the differently abled— as well as the animal… critical posthumanism doesn't see the human as the centre of all things: it sees the human as an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages, and crossings with all forms of life" (4-5).

Such insights from Posthumanism and Animality Studies which constantly decentre the human subjectivity could be the framework for addressing the above queries, and these are examined in chapter 4.

Violence in children's tales and films

The Oxford English Dictionary explains violence as "behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something" (qtd in Todorova 11). Violence has always been an integral part of children's literature, and its origin can be traced to the folk and fairy tales of oral traditions across cultures. As Maureen Nimon observes in his article "Violence in Children's Literature Today" (1993), "in the didactic tradition of writing for children, punishment figured strongly, whether authors were Puritans eighteenth century

rationalists or nineteenth century Evangelicals" (29). He further observes that, "violence, particularly physical violence, was frequently part of punishment, as in the case of a porter who sought to cheat a fisherman and was given fifty lashes and dismissed… But violence also threaded through the lives of the good, many of whom had to prove their steadfastness by enduring physical affliction or mental intimidation" (29). The above observation elucidates how violence, mostly physical violence is used as a didactic and instructive tool in children's literature, for cautioning and/or punishing evildoers. However, as Maria Todorova reminds us, violence is a more complex term, and "beyond death and injury, violence need not always be actual but can also be threatened" ("Translating violence in children's picture books" 250)). Such kinds of violence, argues Todorova, "affects people's lives not immediately but over time…This new shift in the definition of violence places importance on the intentionality of actions, irrespective of direct violent outcomes such as immediate death or physical injury" (251). In the light of the above discussion, it is worth reflecting on the recurrent motif of violence in children's literature from Assam, especially folk and fairy tales where graphic depictions of physical violence are ostensibly justified on the ground that such narratives serve as a tool for didactic instruction for children. Interestingly, the narratives are not confined only to physical forms of violence, but a closer observation of the 'actions of violence' as portrayed in children's literature, reveals that most often the victims succumb to insidious forms of violence, what Galtung refers to as 'structural violence'. As, Todorava observes, "Structural violence is a comprehensive framework to explain how individuals suffer both physical and psychological deterioration due to poverty, class, racism, gender inequality and environmental risk, all of which are being maintained by social structures" (251). Most of the characters from the corpus of the folk and fairy tales from Assam are also subjected to social inequalities owing to their gender, class, poverty and so on. The study in this regard, attempts to examine the representation of violence in varied forms- physical, structural, symbolic, and epistemic in

children's literature through the examples of folk and fairy tales from Assam. Retellings play a very important role in contesting or perpetuating cultural conventions. What role then, do retellings play in addressing the issue of violence in children's literature from Assam? Do they attempt to perpetuate or subvert the violence embedded in the structures of the society? The thesis addresses such queries by focusing on-screen representations of violence in contemporary adaptations of Indian films, such as *Ishu* (2017) by Utpal Borpuzari and *Kothanodi* (2015) by Bhaskar Hazarika.

IV

Plan of the study and choice of texts

Since the study focuses primarily on a particular historical period- the colonial era in Assam, most of the texts have been chosen from the late nineteenth to early decades of the twentieth century, except for the two film adaptations of children's literature released in contemporary times. The fact that the formation of the canon is a conscious and deliberate attempt is acknowledged by critics such as Meibauer and Muller who say that "canons are made, not born, through aesthetic development and cultural processes of test, which can (then) become institutionalized" (*Canon Constitution and Canon Change in Children's Literature* 105). As discussed earlier, one of the primary goals of this study is to see how the canon of children's literature in Assam was consciously formed against the backdrop of cultural nationalism in colonial Assam. The study, therefore, focuses on the works of writers such as Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Navakanta Barua, Atul Chandra Hazarika, Troloikyeswari Devi Baruani, Prafulladutta Goswami, and Sarat Chandra Goswami who played an active role in the formation of the canon of children's literature in Assam during the twentieth century. These writers sought predominantly to develop a sense of canonicity through their writings as demonstrated by the 'Forewords' of their respective works. For instance, in the *Preface* to the

first edition of her folktale collection, *Sadhu Katha*, Troilokyeswari Devi Baruanis states, "since young children love *sadhu katha* I have written down the stories with the hope that it does not get lost/extinct in the future. I hope the guardians help our young children in inculcating the good virtues inherent in the stories" (iii). Interestingly, in the *Preface* to the second edition of *Sadhu Katha*, which was published a year later, Troloikyeswari Devi Baruani acknowledges *Kolikata Viswavidyalaya* for including her text in the curriculum of the university for the matriculation examination. Similarly, Sanjeev Kumar Nath discusses how Lakshminath Bezbaroa's literature for children was particularly designed with a 'moral' or educative' dimension. As Nath states:

> Bezbaroa's collection of folktales- *Burhi Aair Sadhu, Kaka Deuta aru Nati Lora* and *Junuka*- are much more than mere collections of amusing tales for little children. The publication of his tales, particularly *Burhi Aair Sadhu*, must be understood as a part of his life-long attempt at holding up the uniqueness of the Assamese language and culture. He sought to establish the distinctiveness of Assamese folktales, and emphasized their moral or educative dimension (21).

An interpretative approach to the works of these canonical writers, then is a necessary move, as their writings play a crucial role in the transmission of 'cultural values' to children: and in turn, in the perpetuation of certain ideologies to the younger generations. The list of the selected works is, however, by no way exhaustive. The field of children's literature is highly capacious particularly in a culturally and linguistically diverse region as Assam, and, its very capaciousness makes the selection process difficult. However, considering the fact that all research must necessarily be selective, the selection of the writers, as mentioned above emanates from the researcher's general interest in *Sadhu katha* and/or Assamese fantasy literature. However, even in doing so, the study attempts to remain free what Gabriel and Wilson term "narrow in siderisms and parochialisms of the local" (qtd. in *Asian Children's*

Literature and Films 43) by focusing on works that reflect the diverse spirit of the region during the specific period. In this regard, Prafulladutta Goswami's tales for children are particularly selected since he is one of the early folklorists in Assam who painstakingly, compiled tales from the different ethnic and tribal communities of the then undivided greater Assam. For instance, his book entitled "*Assam Deshor Sadhu*" selected for the purpose of this study is the first of its kind to include stories from *Asamiya, Kachari, Karbi, Mising, Garo, Khasia, Chema Naga, Tangkhul Naga, Angami Naga,* and *Manipuri* Community of Assam. Apart from the major portion of literatures from the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century, two adapted films – *Kothanodi* by Bhaskar Hazarika and *Ishu* by Utpal Borpuzari are included in the study from the contemporary period. Robert Stam, a notable critic of adaptation studies argues that "revisiting classic tales renders them defamiliarized or strange, thus opening up the possibility of a shift in perspective that encourages the audience to reflect anew on these stories that have ossified as part of the bedrock of cultural narratives" (qtd. on *Fairy Tale Films*). Following Stam, the two adapted works by Hazarika and Borpuzari are selected since they also attempt to reflect anew on 'old tales' to accommodate a newer understanding of 'cultural ideologies'. While Bhaskar Hazarika attempts to revisit Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Burhi Aair Sadhu* through his film *Kothanodi* by means of an approach altogether darker in nature, Utpal Borpuzari adapts the work of a contemporary children's novel titled *Ishu* by Manikuntala Bhattacharya to throw new light on an age-old practice such as witch-hunting.

Methodology and Theoretical Perspectives

Children's literature as a corpus is contiguous to cultural studies and in dealing with children's literature from Assam it is pertinent to draw critical insights from cultural studies. It is equally pertinent to incorporate critical approaches from postcolonial studies since the study at large focuses on a specific historical period: the colonial era in Assam. Further, since this thesis deals with folk and fairy tales, it is imperative to incorporate critical approaches from

folkloristics. Assam has a rich history of folk culture and literature, and drawing upon folkloristics will ensure a fruitful exploration of recurring motifs. The thesis also attempts to deal with issues related to disability. It will also use insights from the emerging trends in disability studies, which will help in informing and shaping the research substantially. Contemporary research on gender-related issues necessitates a thorough and nuanced understanding of the subject which can be fulfilled through the incorporation of current critical inputs from gender studies. The close links between gender and disability will be addressed by borrowing critical approaches from feminist disability studies scholarship, best exemplified in the works of Rosmarie Garland-Thomson. The issue of gendered violence in the study, however, will be examined more specifically through the theoretical inputs of Poststructural feminists such as Chris Weedon. In addition to the above-mentioned approaches, this thesis will incorporate insights from the current theoretical trends in literary studies, such as Animal Studies, and Critical Posthumanism that seek to address issues of 'subjectivity' and 'identity' around the site of the animal. Since a portion of the study examines retellings and adaptations of children's literature, critical inputs from adaptation studies scholarship and Postmodernism will also be deployed in the study.

CHAPTER DIVISION

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: A Historical overview of the children's literature

Chapter 3: Disability in folk and fairy tales of Assam

Chapter 4: Animality in children's fantasy literature from Assam

Chapter 5: Violence in children's literature of Assam

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The following is a brief outline of the basic ideas of each chapter following the present Introductory chapter:

Chapter 2: A Historical overview of the children's literature

Although the oral tales of 'exciting adventures' and 'impossible happenings' had nurtured the imagination of Indian children for a long time, the fact has been now established that children's literature as a distinct category of literature had its origin in the West, and children's literature in the Indian sub-continent was also shaped during its contact with the West during the colonial period. A historical survey of children's literature is crucial in understanding the socio-cultural and political factors which give rise to the formation of a written body of children's literature at any period. The first part of the second chapter will, therefore, attempt a comprehensive examination of children's literature in general and zone specifically on Assam, focusing on the socio-cultural and political factors which have shaped the literature. Maria Nikolajeva raises a very interesting question in her edited book *Aspects and Issues in the History of Children's Literature* (1995), "is the history of children's literature national or international? Does it follow the same pattern in different countries, or do national conditions influence the emergence and dominance of themes, genres, and attitudes" (x)? By tracing the historical trajectory of children's literature both in the West and at home, in India and Assam, the study attempts to examine whether the emergence of children's literature in non-Western countries such as India follows the same pattern as that of the West. Or does it follow a different pattern? What is the role of colonialism in the formation of children's literature in India at large, and Assam in particular? However, while attempting a historical survey of children's literature in a multi-lingual, multi-cultural country like India, it is highly impracticable to conduct a critical study of children's literatures from all regions and in all languages. At the same time, it is also not feasible to touch upon all the genres of children's literature within the specific period under

study. The study, therefore, confines itself primarily to pertinent genres and issues specific to the current study.

One of the drastic consequences of colonialism is what Alice Taff et al term language oppression- an "enforcement of language loss by physical, mental, social, and spiritual coercion" (qtd in Roche 2). This violent erasure of language is particularly true in the colonial context of Assam when Assamese was replaced by Bengali as the official language for the administrative efficacy of the colonial government. Paradoxically, the knowledge of English and Bengali traditions, the advent of print culture, and the publication and translations of books especially for children among other factors operated as a set of discursive strategies in Assam which in turn, countered the hegemonic power structures at work. The sudden proliferation of children's literature in colonial Assam was, therefore, no coincidence, and it was in fact, fuelled by a feeling of cultural nationalism. The present study will, therefore, assess the impact of colonialism and the upsurge of Assamese cultural nationalism in the formation of a body of children's literature in Assam.

Chapter 3: Disability in Folk and Fairy Tales of Assam

Radhika Menon contends how the 'teaching of a national heritage' as demonstrated with the launching of the popular Amar Chitra Katha in 1967 had its own dangers as "the texts and pictures are replete with racist, sexist and communal overtones" ("Popular Culture and Children's Literature"). In the process of formulating a distinct cultural/national identity, children in colonial Assam were acquainted with the cultural/national heritage and were socialised to perpetuate the same for posterity at a later point of their lives as adults. In the attempt to promote the concept of a golden Asom with a glorious past, the folk and fairy tales compiled by Bezbaroa and others, during the early decades of the twentieth century, which acted as an antidote to the putatively 'alien' learning in colonial Assam also ran the risk of

perpetuating ideologies that are seen today as repressive. One such ideology which is interspersed in most of the folk and fairy tales in Assam is the ableist ideology. The current chapter, in this regard, attempts to address issues of disability as represented in Assamese folk and fairy tales. It will discuss the often 'unproblematized' aspect of disability with regard to the narrative, theme, and characters of folk and fairy tales. The chapter will also attempt to explore how disability and gender are inextricably linked in folk and fairy tales of Assam.

The folk and fairy tales compiled by Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Troloikyeswari Devi Baruani are particularly chosen for this chapter since their works are the earliest examples of 'literary' tales that are seen more as 'collectively owned' than individually authored texts; stories that sought to capture the authentic spirit and culture of the Assamese society then. Such tales which are loaded with ableist ideologies, and, continue to exercise an extraordinary hold over children and adults alike need to be critically addressed through the lens of disability studies. Section I of the chapter provides a general overview of different models of disability and, examines the interplay between 'normality' and 'disability'. Drawing examples from the Assamese *Sadhu katha*, Section II of the chapter argues that representations objectify disabled characters and reinforce cultural stereotypes. Section III of the chapter examines how sometimes disability is often challenged by the very representations through its subversive potential. Section IV of the chapter looks at the intricate relationship between disability and gender by contextualizing disability with the female writer Troloikyeswari Devi Baruani's lived experience of disability.

Chapter 4: Animality in children's fantasy literature from Assam

While there was an increasing interest in folktales and fairy tales for children as part of nation-building and or/ canon building project in the early part of the twentieth century, children's fantasy literature such as novellas with supernatural elements also played an important role in

combating certain colonialist ideology such as speciesism that sanctioned a hierarchy between human and the non-human environment. While conflicts between humans and non-human animals were an integral part of the pre-colonial world, British colonialism had brought about one of the greatest rifts between humans and the non-human environment with massive environmental disruptions in the ecology of Assam. Writers such as Navakanta Barua and Atul Chandra Hazarika particularly condemn such exploitations of non-human nature in their works for children. The present chapter attempts to observe how Navakanta Barua and Atul Chandra Hazarika combat speciesism by destabilizing speciesist hierarchies in their novellas by examining their works through the lens of Animal Studies and Posthumanism. Section I of the chapter attempts to delineate how anthropomorphism is used as a socializing tool in the folktales of Lakshminath Bezbaroa to disseminate certain ethos to children in the wake of the new century. Section II of the chapter seeks to provide a theoretical outline of posthumanism and animality studies in general. The first part of section III explores how the animal, human, and the environment shared an entangled relationality in the pre-colonial folk world by examining a folktale that was equally popular between the Assamese and tribal communities of Assam. The next part of the section examines how children's fantasy novellas from Assam destabilize the anthropocentric worldview through nonsense and translations of popular works for children with eco-pedagogical concerns.

Chapter 5: Violence in children's literature of Assam

From nursery rhymes to fairy tales, paradoxically, violence has generally found room in a seemingly innocent genre as children's literature. This chapter attempts to examine different manifestations of violence- structural, physical, epistemic, discursive, embedded in children's literature, and its retellings from Assam. Section I of the chapter attempts to expose the darker elements implicit in the folk and fairy tales of Assam by analyzing the *sadhu katha* in the light of editorial intervention and self- censorship. Section II of the chapter attempts to provide a

theoretical perspective on adaptations and children's literature in general. Section III of the chapter attempts to examine structural inequalities and the resulting violence from it from a postmodern lens by focusing on Hazarika's *Kothanodi*. Section IV attempts to examine violence from a child's perspective by focusing on Utpal Borpuzari's movie *Ishu*. The folk and fairy tales compiled by Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Sarat Chandra Goswami, and Prafulladutta Goswami for young children are selected for the purpose of the first part of the chapter. Bhaskar Hazarika's *Kothanodi* (2015) and Utpal Borpuzari's *Ishu* (2017) are chosen for exploring the role of adaptations and violence in contemporary times.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Chapter 6 attempts to briefly sum up the main findings of the study and makes suggestions for newer research in the arena of children's literature in Assam.

Conclusion

Anandaram Dekhial Phukan makes a very sound argument in his third edition of the children's pamphlet titled *Asamiya Lorar Mitra*, Phukan argues that "the plan pursued in the vernacular schools established by government is not sufficient of itself to give students a useful practical education, for, the books used in them are in the Bengali language and consequently they are not strictly vernacular" (*Asamiya Lorar Mitra* 133). The attempt on the part of Phukan, and others like him, therefore, was to "raise the Assamese from their deep ignorance and to interest them in useful subjects" (133) in the vernacular Assamese language. Phukan's hope to continue the series of children's books, however, could not be fulfilled owing to his premature death, but his vision to fill the 'deficiency' of books for children was subsequently fulfilled by later writers who produced books for children in an accelerating pace. To put it simply, the current study attempts to locate the specific historical and cultural contexts in which such a series of books were produced for children. Secondly, it attempts to critically investigate the 'cultural

values' embedded in children's literature within the specific period under study by establishing a critical dialogue with current theoretical inputs.

NOTES

[1.] The Neo-Vaishnava Bhakti movement was spearheaded by the saint-poet Srimanta Sankardeva in the 15th-16th century in the Indian state of Assam.

[2.] The line *Kartala Kamal Kamaladala Nayan* can be translated as 'your palm is like the lotus, your eyes resemble lotus petals'. It was composed by Srimanta Sankardev to eulogize the divine attributes of the lotus-eyed, Lord Krishna.

[3.] The word *Sadhu Katha* can be translated into English simply as 'a tale'. Henceforth, the term will be used to refer to folk and fairy tales as well as any story that involves fantastic element, particularly meant for children.

[4.] Karma is a concept of Hinduism which literally means 'an action'. The term specifically refers to the process of transmigration of the soul.

[5.] *Kolikata Viswavidyalaya* or the University of Kolkata is a public university in the Indian state of Kolkata. Until the establishment of Gauhati University in 1948, the *Kolikata Viswavidyalaya* catered to the educational needs of students from Assam.

Chapter II

A Historical overview of Children's Literature

"History" is freely acknowledged to be a kind of story-telling towards the present, that is, a textual construct at once itself an interpretation and itself open to interpretation (Felperin 1991: 89).

Perry Nodelman, in his book *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (2008), echoes Fredric Jameson's reflection at the beginning of *The Political Unconscious*, where he states, "Always Historicize!". Nodelman rightly observes that, "readers can develop the most specific and detailed understanding of texts and their significance by being aware of the historic forces that produced them". However, is it possible to claim a general history of the development of children's literature? Considering the nuances and subtleties involved in defining the term 'children's literature' it is clear that creating a history of such a body of literature is highly problematic. For instance, a history of English literature or American literature or Indian literature can be defined with ease; but a history of children's literature, to put once again in the words of Seth Lerer, "is inseparable from the history of childhood". And childhood, as such is a shifting category, which has meaning only "in relationship to other stages of personal development and family life" (*Children's Literature* 2). Despite the intrinsic problems involved in taking a historical approach of/to children's literature, writers, nevertheless, have attempted to outline a highly informative and insightful history of the subject. From Aries and Avery to Peter Hunt and Jack Zipes, critics have attempted to outline histories of children's literature. Zohar Shavit, who is a contemporary scholar of children's literature, suggests that there is common basis to a historical model of children's literature:

> a similar historical model is common to all children's literatures both in their inception and later on in their development. The same stages of development and later the same historical patterns recur time and again in all children's literatures, transcending national boundaries and even temporal ones. Regardless of when and where a system of children's literature began to develop, whether its emergence took place a hundred or even two hundred years later, all systems of children's literature known to us, without exception, pass through the same stages of development. Moreover, the same cultural factors and institutions are involved in their creation" ("The Historical Model" 28).

Citing the example of the Puritans and the trajectory of their journey from England to America, Shavit argues that it is the socio-cultural and political forces which lead to the development of children's literature at any given period of time: "it was always ideology, linked with a strong educational doctrine, which formed the basis of official children's literature" (28).

What factors, then, helped in the formation of a body of literature for children in the West and subsequently in India, and Assam? Was it linked to ideology as Shavit argues? If so, which ideologies shaped the category of literature, today understood as children's literature. In order to grasp how socio-cultural and political forces are at work in the formation or development of a body of children's literature, the present chapter attempts to trace, in brief, the historical trajectory of children's literature in the West and in India, and subsequently in Assam. Section I undertakes a historical overview of children's literature in the West, while section II takes a similar historical approach with regard to India. Section III outlines the history of children's literature in Assam from oral traditions to contemporary times and section IV examines the impact of colonialism and the upsurge of Assamese cultural nationalism in the formation of a body of children's literature in Assam.

An Outline of Children's Literature in the West: The Beginnings

The origin of children's literature as a distinctive body had its roots in what has been termed as the clash between "instruction and delight". But even before knowing what kind of books are essential for children, what they were supposed to read and which books would delight or instruct them, there had to be a notion of 'children' as such. John Rowe Townsend, an eminent children's literature critic, rightly observes that "before there could be children's books, there had to be children" ("Theory" 28). However, as Phillippe Aries' grounding-breaking study of childhood, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), delineates, during the medieval period the modern concept of the child as different from adults was not recognized. According to Aries, cultures preceding the 15th century viewed children as 'little adults', who shared the same traditions, games and clothes as adults. Therefore, the new notion of the child, as distinct from adults, eventually fostered particular requirements for the newly emerging 'child'. These requirements may have included everything from their emotional needs to their material and educational wants. Correspondingly, once a new understanding of the child emerged into societal consciousness in the seventeenth century "a new and previously unknown demand for books exclusively produced for children appeared on the cultural scene" ("The Historical" 29). Therefore, the new demand for books which occurred in direct response to the emergence of new understanding of 'children' and 'childhood', is crucial in creating a body of children's literature. As Shavit rightly observes in his study "The Historical Model of the Development of Children's Literature", "before children's needs gained recognition and legitimation as distinct and different from those of adults, children's literature could not have emerged" (28). But what kinds of books were children supposed to read? And what did they actually want to read? There commenced the battle between "instruction and delight" which has been continuous till the present times.

The Educational Model and Literature for Children

The emergence of a changed conception of childhood led to a new concept of educational system in seventeenth century England. Books, as such, did not have a special place in the apprenticeship system which existed before this new education system came into being. As Shavit puts it:

> Until then children, who were educated in the framework of the apprenticeship system, did not need books in their educational process. As a new concept of education—the school system—replaced the apprenticeship system, books became part of the educational system for the first time and an indispensable vehicle for achieving its goal. Thus, the new education system both legitimized books for children and created a certain corpus of texts and a set of norms according to which official books for children had to be written. ("The Historical Model" 29).

The above excerpt sheds light on the fact that with the new educational system, books were published and issued pertaining to the needs of children's education. Therefore, it was the system of education which determined the nature of texts for children. And since the primary motto of education is to teach, books that were produced were also didactic and instructive in nature. Apart from "books of manners" and "courtesy books", which continued to exist, Primers, ABC books and horn books were newly introduced into the system of education with the sole purpose of 'teaching' the child. The role of the educational system in the development of children's literature is explained in detail by Zohar Shavit, which is worth quoting at this juncture:

> …the educational system was intrinsically involved in the development of books for children, which later emerged in culture as a system of children's literature. The pattern of development in children's literature indicates that the educational system not only

> served as a framework for the creation and legitimization of children's literature, but also determined its stages of development. The fact that children's literature relied on the legitimatization of the educational establishment, which also served as its contiguous frame of reference, accounts for a recurring pattern typical of all beginnings of official children's literature. (Shavit 30).

Official children's literature like the ABC books and Primers were introduced chiefly with a certain religious-educational doctrine. Puritanical society perceived children as inherently evil which was connected to an understanding of the notion of the 'Original Sin'. Therefore, children's books emerged from an understanding that if children were not corrected and redeemed, the evil and immorality intrinsic to human nature might engulf the child on its path to adulthood. It is against such a theological background that various writers attempted to instill virtue and devotion among children through literature intended for them. For instance, the opening line of *The New England Primer* reads "A: In Adam's fall we sinned all" (*Once upon* 15). The primers which had the alphabet appearing in both upper and lower-case letters, followed by an illustrated alphabet accompanied by verse, had a strong puritanical stance. In its attempt to teach the alphabet to children with pictures or rhymes, it also performed the dual goal of teaching and imparting scriptural knowledge. Another exemplary work which corroborated the puritanical notion of 'godly lives' and 'torments of hell' is, James Janeway's, *A Token for Children* published in 1671. Janeway's book, with its didactic content and instructive outlook, attempts to nurture "holy and exemplary lives, and joyful deaths of children" as the subtitle suggests. The book, by adhering to the established theological doctrine of the age, became very popular both in England and America. While books like Janeway's were accepted by a large audience, wonder tales were condemned on moral grounds. For instance, Hugh Rhodes, a puritanical writer, alleged in one of his books, *Book of Nurture* (1554), that "feigned fables, vain fantasies and wanton stories and songs of love brought much

mischief to youth" (qtd. in "British Children's" 668). This practice of disavowing wonder tales may be seen even in subsequent times.

Children's literature in eighteenth century England was influenced by the educational philosophies of John Locke and Rousseau. John Locke saw the child as "being born in a state of innocence, and the young mind as a tabula rasa—a clean slate, waiting to be written on" ("British Children's Literature" 668). Unlike the puritans, who associated children with innate evil, John Locke viewed children as innately innocent, whose disposition could be moulded through education. In addition, Locke was indeed the first social thinker to suggest the possibility of infusing pleasure with instruction. As he notes in his *Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), "children could be cozened into a knowledge of their letters and could play themselves what others are whipped for" ("British Children's Literature" 669). Locke's dictum of teaching and pleasing indeed opened a platform for various writers to experiment with their works. Some of the prominent writers who expounded Locke's theory are John Henry Newbery, Sarah Fielding amongst others, who will be discussed in the next section.

Apart from John Locke, the philosophies of Jean Jacques Rousseau also had an enormous impact on the literature produced for children from the eighteenth century. His doctrine that "civilization had overlaid natural virtue with idleness, inequality and indulgence" finds reflection in the works of writers like Maria Edgeworth, Thomas Day, Sarah Trimmer, Mary Martha Sherwood and others. For example, in one of the best-known stories of Maria Edgeworth, "*The Purple Jar"* which first appeared in *The Parents' Assistant* (1796), the young character learns about the practicalities of life through experience, a notion propounded by Rousseau. The works of these children's writers basically emphasize the victory of the natural and rational over the corrupting influences of evil society. The educational philosophies of both Locke and Rousseau focused on instructing the child, although they also supported the notion of imparting pleasure to children. Zora Shavit, in her article "The Historical Model of the

Development of Children's Literature" discusses comprehensively the role of the changing educational system and the influence of educational philosophies of Locke and Rousseau in the emergence of children's literature in England. This analysis specifically sheds light on the socio-cultural background in shaping a distinct body of children's literature. Following the educational philosophies of Locke and Rousseau, the real battle between instruction and delight was carried on in the field of children's literature in subsequent periods.

Entertainment Alongside Instruction

Although officially the ABC books and primers filled the vacuum of literary space for children, chapbooks circulating in an unofficial capacity were a source of delight for children in these centuries. Amy Weinstein, in her book *Once upon a time: Fairy tales, Fables, Primers, Pop-ups and Other Children's Books* defines chapbooks as illustrated children's books "sold by traveling peddlers in Britain and America in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century" (4). According to Amy Weinstein, chapbooks were quite inexpensive four (or multiples of four) page pamphlets featuring "folktales, Biblical stories, nursery rhymes, and stories of mass appeal, all of which were eventually adopted by children's book publishers" (*Once upon a time* 4). What is striking about these chapbooks is that, although children were not allowed to read them for their imaginary content, they appealed to the young and old alike, possibly in their capacity to entertain. The demands of the new reading public, which could not be fulfilled by the theocentric-educational approach, were ironically catered to by chapbooks. Zohar Shavit examines this point:

> As a result of the new notion of the child and of childhood, a new reading public came into being in society and a new demand for children's books emerged on the literary scene. This demand could not as yet be supplied in full by the educational establishment, who regarded reading as a gateway to higher religious enlightenment,

> but absolutely not as a means of entertainment or pleasure… the vacuum thus created in the system was filed by an unexpected source: the non-official adult literature of the time, that is to say, chapbooks, which children found very appealing ("The Historical" 30).

Chapbooks therefore, led an impetus to incorporate 'pleasure' or 'entertainment' in children's books for the first time. This is evident from the growing competition which official books had with the chapbooks, particularly in their subject matter. Moreover, the educational philosophy of Locke had already opened up new avenues for writers and publishers to consider including pleasure and delight alongside instruction in their books for children. At this juncture, special mention must be made of John Newbery, who is accredited as the first commercial publisher of children's books in the eighteenth century (1744). Shavit acknowledges that Newbery created altogether a new market for children's literature:

> Newbery tried to appeal to the child by offering him an alternative to his reading of chapbooks, without losing his advantage over the chapbooks, namely, without violating the values of educators and parents. Newbery was aware of the existing inventory of books for children—chapbooks, lesson books, manuals of good advice, and Aesop's fables—and attempted to use elements of each in order to enhance the competitive capacity of his books as much as possible. In his books, he combined elements of chapbooks which appealed to the child, with morality which appealed to the parent and teacher ("The Historical Model" 15).

Newbery, by adhering to the established doctrine, had strategically established a successful publishing commercial market of children's literature. His *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (1744) was intended 'for the instruction and amusement' of both "Little Master Tommy' and "Pretty Miss Polly' (*A Very Short Introduction* 17). Intriguingly, several new publishers followed

Newbery's path and published books that swelled the numbers in the category of what is now known as, children's literature. The eighteenth century, therefore, marks the beginning of children's literature; a distinct field of an emerging body of texts. Kimberly reflects in the same vein that, "traditionally, histories of children's literature celebrated the arrival of commercial publishing for children in the 18th century as the moment when children's literature as we know it today begins" (*A Very Short History of Children's Literature* 11, 2011).Apart from Newbery, mention may be made of the writer-publisher Thomas Boreman, who published *A Description of Three Hundred Animal* (1730), and Mary Cooper whose *Tommy Thumb Pretty Song Book* (1744) features some of the most popular nursery rhymes such as "Bah, bah, black sheep", "Hickory dickory dock", "London Bridge is falling down", etc. Apart from books which were exclusively intended for children, pioneering works like John Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress* (1678) and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), though written for adults, were soon included in the body of children's literature in eighteenth century England. The popularity of these two works rests in their appropriation to pedagogic practices of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, which encourage children to inculcate virtues such as industry, perseverance, thrift, forbearance to the trials and tribulations of life, etc. The character of Christian or/and Crusoe suited the needs of the educational philosophies of the time, which soon permeated children's literature as well.

In addition to the momentous invention of a new publishing industry, the eighteenth century also perceived new notions of scientific temperament and reason against the backdrop of the Enlightenment, and consequently these views were also found reflected in works meant for children.

The Romantic Spirit of Imagination and Children's Literature

A little child, a limber elf

Singing, dancing to itself,

A Faery thing with red round cheeks,

That always finds and never seeks, ("Christabel" 82-88).

These lines from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Christabel" underline the 'romantic child'; pure, innocent, joyful, imaginative, free being and in-tune-with nature. The 'elf' and 'faery' in Coleridge's lines parallels the romantic view of the child, with notions of imagination and supernaturalism. Much of the literature produced during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century viewed childhood as "a desirable state, distinct from adulthood, for which adults longed: a lost, idealized, clear-visioned, divinely pure, intuitive" stage of life which adults sought to capture in literature (*The Child in British Literature* 8, 2012). This nostalgia for a divine past, exemplified by a lost childhood, finds expression in the works of William Blake, Wordsworth, Charles Lamb amongst others. Wordsworth's poems such as "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" articulates the romantic vision of the child as an innocent and imaginative being, who is much desired and idealized by adults. Although Wordsworth's poetry extensively talks about the 'child' in relation to nature, his works were not intended for children, but for adults. Probably for this reason, he is not recognized as a canonical writer for children. Unlike Wordsworth, Charles Lamb did write for children, for instance "Tales from Shakespeare", which he wrote in collaboration with his sister Mary Lamb. William Blake dwelt on the innocence of childhood and the tainting of its radiance by adult experience in *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*. The romantic spirit of imagination, thus, provided an impetus for fantasy which was later explored by writers who wrote for children during the Victorian Age.

The nineteenth century saw the proliferation of books written specifically for children. Although the works produced in the eighteenth century attempted to provide amusement together with instruction, it was only in the nineteenth century that imagination governed children's literature. In this regard, special mention may be made of Lewis Carroll's ground-breaking novel *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), which is often considered a watershed in fantasy literature for children. As Huck comments "What made this story absolutely unique for its time was that it contained not a trace of a lesson or a moral. It was really made purely for enjoyment" ("Children's Literature- New" 5). Indeed, Carrol paved the way for subsequent writers of children's literature to explore make-believe worlds in very creative ways. But it would be inappropriate to claim that Carroll's narratives emerged in a vacuum without antecedents. Edward Lear's *A Book of Nonsense* (1848) had delighted readers with riddles, puzzles, or in Lear's words, the 'wisdom of folly'. Children and adults alike enjoyed Edward Lear's 'verbal nonsense' undermining the hegemony of then prevailing 'rational' literature. However, the one genre that immensely contributed to the rise of fantasy in the nineteenth century was the 'fairy tale' in its literary form. The fairy tales of Charles Perrault and others, which were already incorporated in self-effacing chapbooks, were subsequently recognized as a legitimate genre of children's literature in the nineteenth century. For instance, Charles Perrault's classic anthology of seven fairy tales, *Contes du temps* (1697), was soon translated into English as "Mother Goose's Tales" (1729). The influence of Brother Grimms on the growth of the body of children's literature is strikingly important. Amy Weinstein discusses the influence of their work on the English-speaking world:

> The popularity of fairy tales, as well as a battle over their fitness for juvenile consumption, waxed and waned throughout the eighteenth century. Interest was rekindled in the nineteenth century, through the efforts of Jacob Grimm (1785-1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786-1859) … Translated into English in 1823, the

> Grimms'sfairy tales eventually numbered approximately two hundred, including many of those recorded earlier by Perrault…Culling from these sources American publishers printed copious fairy tales in the nineteenth century, occasionally taking liberties with their plots and adding new twists (*Once upon a time* 70).

The first English translation of *Kinder-und Haus-Marchen* by Edgar Taylor in 1823 as *German Popular Stories* attempted to "tickle the palate of the young" and satiate the "appetite of those in graver years" as noted by Taylor himself in the *Preface* of the collection (1823). With exciting tales of magic, witches, ogres, prince and princesses, dark woods, exotic images, the Grimms' fairy tales appealed to children's imagination. Following the examples of the Grimms, the Danish Hans Christian Anderson captured folk tales to create his own stories (1835). In his article "Children's Fantasy and Science Fiction", Francis Molson asserts that Anderson is strikingly remarkable in the realm of children's wonder tales because he demonstrated, for the first time, that writers of fairy tales need not necessarily depend upon authentic folk tales for subject matter, that they could push beyond old tales by either embellishing them or creating something new entirely (22).

The trend of fairy tales remained popular throughout nineteenth century, and several writers tried their hands at the fairy tale genre. For instance, Joseph Jacob's collection of *British Fairy Tales* (1890), Andrew Lang's various anthologies of fairy tales such as *The Blue Fairy Book, The Yellow Fairy Book, The Pink Fairy Book* and a whole host of 'coloured' fairy books (1889 and subsequent years), William Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring* (1885), John Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River* (1851), Oscar Wilde's "The Selfish Giant" and so on were immensely popular. The linking of the romantic imagination with childhood and the importance of fantasy in children's literature eventually marked this age as the "Golden Age" of children's literature. The subject-matter/scope of the books included everything ranging from "evangelical tearjerkers through fantasy, fairy tales, nonsense, and an array of genres including adventure,

animal, and school stories" giving rise to a varied body of children's literature (*A Very Short* 16). However, the impact of industrialization on childhood during Victorian times and the literature emanating from the dark streets of London cannot be overlooked. Henry Mayhew in his *London Labour and London Poor* (1831) details the anecdotes of child labour working in the factories of London. Ella, one of the sweepers, notes in Mayhem's book:

> About a twelve-month after father's death mother was taken bad with the cholera, and died... I got a place as a servant of all work. I was only turned, just turned, eleven then. I worked along with a French lady and a gentleman in Hatton Garden, who used to give me a shilling-a-week and my tea. I left them because they were going to a place called Italy perhaps you may have heard tell of it? (506).

The societal neglect of children in an industrializing nation, their vulnerability and powerlessness, their lament and tears over illness and death are poignantly portrayed by Charles Dickens in his realistic novels. So powerful and realistic was Dickens' portrayal of characters like Oliver Twist, Pip, and Little Nell that these literary children provoked/invoked a social consciousness and demanded social justice from the era. Although Dickens' popularity rests primarily on his social commentary on the times, his works also advocate the importance of fantasy for children. Dickens highlights the importance of 'fairy literature' in "Frauds on the Fairies" from his miscellaneous collection *Household Words*. Stressing on the importance of fairy tales Dickens notes:

> It would be hard to estimate the amount of gentleness and mercy that has made its way through these slight channels. Forbearance, courtesy, consideration for the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, the love of nature, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force—many good things have been first nourished in the child's heart by this powerful

> aid… In a Utilitarian age, of all other times, it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy Tales should be respected ("Frauds on the Fairies" 56).

At a time when there was religious and rational resistance to fantasy, Dickens' defense of it played a pivotal role in producing a rich vein of entertaining and imaginative literature for children. The works of George MacDonald such as *The Princess and Curdie* (1883), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), J. M Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904, 1911) and Edith Nesbit's *The Treasure Seekers* (1899) and *Five Children in It* (1902) deserve special mention here. The upsurge of evangelicalism in the Victorian era also resulted in a moral and didactic literature for children which Charlotte Bronte indicates with irony in *Jane Eyre* (1847) in her portrayal of the harsh life of orphanage schools in Victorian England. It also depicts how illness and early death were idealized in Victorian society in the name of godliness and spiritual regeneration. The conversation between Jane Eyre and Helen Burns during the last moments of Helen's death at Lowood Institution is strikingly important against the backdrop of Victorian Christian theology: "Where is God? What is God?" "My Maker and yours, who will never destroy what he created. I rely implicitly on his power and confide wholly in his goodness: I count the hours till that eventful one arrives which shall restore me to him, reveal him to me" (*Jane Eyre* 58-59).

Certain books, although intended for adults or vice-versa, had mixed audience and appealed to adults and children alike. Books such as *Robison Crusoe, Gulliver's Travels, The Swiss Family Robison, The Water-Babies, Alice* and a few others fall in this line, what is now termed as "crossover fiction" (*A Short History of Children's Literature* 3). From the late nineteenth to the mid-twenties the nationalistic fervour in Great Britain resulting from its economic, political and cultural sway over the world found nationalistic expression. The all-pervasive influence of this jingoism also gave way to a new order of 'manliness', resulting in a revival of the values of chivalry, masculinity and Christian evangelism. Against this backdrop a wide spectrum of

"Boy's fiction" emerged on the literary scene. Commenting on the significance of imperial adventures among school boys Jeffrey Richards notes in his book *Imperialism and Juvenile Literature*, "this chivalry, encapsulated in public school code, lay at the heart of the genre of public-school fiction, which was the other chief reading preference of boys in Britain's Imperial century. It was read at every level of society and provided the dominant image of 'manliness'" (7). The dispersal of imperialist adventurous ideology in the literature produced for children resulted in a whole host of adventure novels like *Treasure Island*, *The Coral Island*, *Kidnapped* and a few others.

The twentieth century witnessed a celebration of childhood imagination and creativity in the realm of children's literature. However, by the twentieth century children's literature had enlarged its scope to incorporate a whole host of topical issues. From realism to fantasy, tragedy to comedy, writing for children now encompassed different experiences of childhood and has today emerged into a heterogenous body of literature.

The Impact of New Media on Children's Literature

Since its very inception children's literature has undergone wide-ranging developments. However, the kind of influence which new technologies and media have had upon children's literature is striking. Kimberly makes this important observation in his *Children's Literature*: *A Very Short Introduction*:

> The emergence of new media has also influenced the forms, formats, and narrative techniques of writing for children. Children's stories have been adapted for films and television, written to be read on radio, recorded on vinyl, audio tape and CDs and been conceived as CD-ROMs, electronic and online fictions. Each new medium has had its impact on how stories are written, how and where they are encountered, and even what it means to read (23).

In the wake of new media, a body of scholarship addressing children's literature and adaptations has emerged in recent years. Linda Hutcheon, in her book *A Theory of Adaptations,* quotes Virginia Woolf who states that, "cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression in words" (qtd. in *A Theory* 22). Woolf's statement is particularly applicable in a postmodern world, where *simulation* or *replication* of 'visual signs' are the only means to arrive at a momentary meaning (there is no possibility of conclusive meaning in the postmodern context). Adaptations, in this regard play a pivotal role in reiterating and circulating the visual signs for, what Guy Debord, has termed as the contemporary 'society of the spectacle' (*Society of the Spectacle* 1967). Considering the role of adaptations in contemporary culture and society, critics and writers of children's literature also attempt to offer fresh perspectives on the relationship between adaptations and children's literature. For instance, Benjamin Lefebvre, in his book *Textual Transformation in Children's Literature: Adaptations, Translations, Reconsiderations* considers the economic, artistic and ideological underpinnings of textual transformations into other media like films, parodies, computer game versions etc. Robin Mccallum's *Screen Adaptations and the Politics of Childhood*: *Transforming Children's Literature into Films* examines how adaptations of children's literature play an important role in transmitting cultural values and ideologies. As he himself puts in, "film adaptations of literary texts for children and young people have also played, and continue to play, a crucial role in the culture wars of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries" (*Screen Adaptations* 1).

The impact of media has also opened new avenues in our understanding of what constitutes children's literature. Historically, children have not written whatever counted as children's literature mostly because, "it was generally assumed that they had too little experience of the world or the craft of writing" (*A Short History* 24). Nevertheless, children definitely must have tried their hands at different forms of writing including riddles, poems or jokes. The twenty

first century, with the intervention of technology, opens up new platforms for children to explore their talents. As Kimberly notes, "in an age of desktop publishing, fan fiction, and other forms of online publication, children and young people are finding ways of writing for a public beyond their immediate family, friends, and peers" (24). From tales transmitted orally to the invention of new digital genres children's literature has come a long way in the West. However, very little is known about the origin and development of children's literature in India. The next section attempts an examination.

Children's Literature in India: A Brief Overview

Storytelling in India

Indian culture is a reservoir of mythology, legend and folklore. Central to large family networks that characterize traditional Indian society, a child's intergenerational bonding with family members from grandparents to parents is made stronger through the process of narrating stories. A. K. Ramanujan reminisces his childhood memories of listening to stories in one of his articles "Telling Tales": "The stories we heard downstairs were in Tamil (or in friends' houses, in Kannada); they were told by a grandmother, an aunt, or a cook, they were told at dusk while we were eating, for South Indian stories tend to be mealtime rather than bedtime stories. Associated with relaxed loving figures, with sleep and food, the tales were formative influences and hypnotic" (240). Ramanujan's narrative makes it evident that such tales, which are meant for children, pervaded across the country in all generations. Undoubtedly, the living oral-tradition of India has a lot to offer to children from all sections of society. This is an important consideration because in a country like India, where thousands of children are deprived of access to schools and books due to divisions of caste and class, these oral tales enrich and shape their childhood.

However, despite the ubiquitous presence of stories and tales across the country, the notion of children's books as an established category of literature is a very recent phenomenon. Manorama Jafa, a distinguished children's literature writer and critic from India, rightly observes that, "The concept of children's literature as a separate discipline has come from the west; contact with European countries, and particularly with English and the English language, has led to the growth of modern literature for children" ("The Indian Sub-Continent" 797). The emergence of children's literature as a distinct body of literature, therefore, is a post-Independence phenomenon. Before analysing the development of children's literature from pre-colonial to post-colonial times, it is worth noting how Manorama Jafa traces the development of children's literature in India. According to Jafa:

> the development of children's literature in the sub-continent has passed through three distinct phases. Initially, the stories from the oral tradition, mythology, religion, folk-tales, legends and classics were adapted and rewritten. Then there were translations and adaptions of material already published in England and other European countries and also in different native languages. Original creative writing has appeared only in recent years (798).

The first phase can be traced back to the times when stories such as *Panchatantra*, *Hitopadesa*, *Jataka tales* and *Kathasaritsagar* were collected and compiled. Ira Saxena in her article "Indian Children's Stories through the Centuries" notes how the ancient teacher Vishnu Sharma compiled the first collection of children's stories *Panchatantra* for the princes of a vast Himalayan kingdom around 200 B.C (56). With the primary aim of teaching children *niti* or 'the wise conduct of life', *Panchatantra* has continued to delight and instruct children throughout the ages. Together with *Panchatantra*, Kshemendra's *Brihadkatha Manjari*, Narayan Bhatt's *Hitopdesh*, the Buddhist *Jataka tales* and the epics of *Mahabharat* and

Ramayan and the ancient Sanskrit classics have been perennial sources of stories for children. Ira Saxena observes:

> Also, parts of our oral heritage are the Sanskrit epics Ramayana and Mahabharat, which have enthralled children and adults for generations with their universal appeal and their gripping episodes… Both epics have become part of our national culture and are the subject of ballet performances, classical and folk dance and drama, and a variety of publications for children ("Indian Children's" 57).

Undoubtedly, the rich and imaginative folk tales of India remain the most interesting source of inspiration for children's literature. As Ramanujan notes, "Oral literature precedes other kinds in India in the lives of individuals and communities. It offers forms, presumptions of meaning, that are filled out by later living" ("Telling Tales" 253). The rich subject matter of these oral tales ranging from the stories of ogres, ghosts, spirits to the stories of gods 'rishis' and 'munis', formed the basis for a written literature for children in subsequent times. Besides the influences mentioned above, Ira Saxena highlights the significance of two-story cycles which were widely known. According to her, the stories based on the valiant king Vikramaditya, who ruled India in the second century B.C., influenced children's literature to a great extent. To put in Ira Saxena's words, "*Singhasan Batisi*, thirty-two stories of the bravery of people who aspired to Vikramaditya's throne, and *Vetal Panchivimsati*, twenty-five ghost stories that create a world of wonder and courage… have survived to this day through Indian storytellers … and storytelling by grandparents in the home continue this tradition" (57).

Understanding childhood in India

As it has already been stated, childhood in India, is marked by interpersonal relationships and familial bonds, even in the face of the rapid social change that marks recent decades. The male child particularly, being the nucleus of the family is associated with divinity (lovable

state) to whom the adults are likely to devote utmost love. As Sudhir Kakar observes in his article, "The Child in Indian Tradition": "the child in Indian tradition is ideologically considered a valuable and welcome being to whom the adults are expected to afford their fullest protection, affection and indulgence" (210). The 'child' Kakar is referring to is, undoubtedly, the Indian male child. Indian society has always glorified the male child and was unreceptive to, if not actually hostile, to the female child. Some of these issues relating to gender will be taken up later with regard to disability and violence in chapter 3 and chapter 5 respectively.

Contrary to the *socialization* model of the West, which focuses solely on the child and his journey towards adulthood, Sudhir Kakar talks about the *interplay* paradigm in India where the adult and child grow up in mutual learning and pleasure. Contrary to the West, the family structure in India has always ensured that children are surrounded by adults who are happy to narrate fantasy and fairy tales. Stories that delight have never been associated with sinful pleasure as in the West. Orally transmitted tales are shot through with fantastic elements, which in turn kindle the imagination of children. Although imagination played a pivotal role in children's literature in India, instruction or *niti* was also an important consideration. It is apparent from the beast fable of *Panchatantra* that tales were compiled to teach or impart certain 'codes of conduct' to children so as to make them aware of the real world through the allusions. As Kamal Sheoran observes:

> Animal fables from this source are predominant and remain as always society's traditional vehicle of social and moral instruction. Tales of animal wisdom, cunning, and foolishness, in which conventional animal characteristics are ignored, are peculiar to India. Thus, it is not at all unusual to find a clever quail, an intelligent crow, a smart jackal, or a stupid tiger; the owl is regarded as an ill omen, but not the raven; the peacock, far from being vain, is said to weep because he has such ugly feet, and the

> snake is not considered dangerous and vile but a protector of the innocent ("Contemporary Children's Literature" 3).

Impact of British Colonization on Children's Literature in India

We must now turn to the second stage of development of children's literature in India, which Manorama Jafa discusses in one of her articles titled "The Indian Subcontinent" from the book *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (1996). Unsurprisingly it is colonial educational and administrative policies that brought about changes in Indian culture. She cites Meena Khorana who reiterates the point in her discussion on the impact of British colonial rule on children's literature in the Indian sub-continent:

> The British educational policy, designed to produce a class of administrators for the civil service and government posts, resulted in the neglect of local languages and indigenous religious institutions like the madrasas, gurukuls and Buddhist viharas that had traditionally nourished the culture and literature of the subcontinent. This led to a marked class structure in education as upper-class children were generally educated in English, hence producing an English-speaking elite that was educated at western-style school reading and demanding imported books in English…Because of this dependence on imported books, the tradition of publishing was not well established and book publishing did not exist as a discipline in the subcontinent (*The Indian Subcontinent in Literature* xii).

The impact of the English language on Indian languages and literature is a contentious issue in postcolonial studies. Without entering into the debate, one may only venture to submit statistics which show that the demand of children's books fuelled not only a market for imported children's books in India but also created the basis for a separate category of literature devoted to children. Under the influence of the missionaries and the advent of the printing press in India

(1780), new publishing houses were set up. These activities gave an impetus not only to literature in general, but also to the development of a literature specifically written for children. In this regard, special mention may be made of the establishment of the School Book Society by the Christian missionaries in Calcutta in 1817, following which "several well-known books published in English were translated into Indian languages and traditional Indian tales were rewritten and adapted for children" ("The Indian Sub-Continent" 798).

The nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed a major shift from the oral practice of story-telling to the print-publishing tradition. Apart from textbooks published for the purpose of educating young Indians, a number of books were also published to amuse children. As Ira Saxena records, "a number of magazines appeared, including *Digdarshan* (1818), *Vidyarthi* (1914), and *Shishu* (1915) in Hindi and *Sandesh* (1905) in Bengali" (58). However, when it comes to the written body of literature for children, it is extremely difficult to corral it under one distinct category, especially in a multilingual and multicultural country like India. Kamal Sheoran in his article titled "Contemporary Children's Literature in India" discusses the difficulties involved in dealing with such a body of literature in a vast and varied country like India. To put in his words, "in dealing with a written literature for children one is faced with a peculiar problem. No other country has such a variety of recognized individual languages in current use as India, and the fact that there is no common language for the five hundred million people affects the entire literature of the country" (130). With the population increasing to more than 1.2 billion and with as many as 22 constitutional languages during the present, it is not viable to conduct a critical study of children's literature of all regions and languages. However, an attempt has been made to touch upon major works in two major Indian languages, before going on to discuss the specific case of Assam.

Children's Literature in Bengali

Of all the regional languages of India, Bengal has a rich history of producing literature for children due to its early contact with the West. Before the advent of modern written literature for children however, oral tales circulated in Bengal like any other region of India. Bengali children's literature marked its beginning with the publication of *Digdarsan* (1818), a journal published under the editorship of John Clerk Marshman from Serampore press. Thereafter, a host of other magazines intended for children such as *Pasvavali* (1822), *Gnanodaya* (1831), *Abodh Bandhu* (1863 and 1866), *Balak Bandhu* (1878) *Sakha* (1885), *Balak* (1885), *Sakha o Sakhi* (1894), *Mukul* (1895) amongst others, emerged on the cultural scene. However, the most prominent magazine, which was immensely popular among children, is Upendra Kishore's *Sandesh* (1913). With a wide spectrum of stories, poems, rhymes, riddles, and moral tales these magazines served as a platform for the emergence of children's literature in nineteenth century Bengal. Together with adults, children could also contribute creative articles in magazines such as *Balak Bandhu* (1878). The literary merit of these magazines lay in the fact that they were whole-heartedly supported by the polymaths of Bengali classical literature such as Jogindranath Sarkar, Rabindranath Tagore, Keshabchandra Sen, Upendra Kishore and many others. For instance, Nabendu Sen talks about Parmada Charan Sen's popular children's poem in *Balak Bandhu*:

Aah! Chededaona Kukur Chandra Mayer Kache jai

Aekhankiaarkhelakarar Samay ache bhai."

Oh! my dog brother, please let me go to my mother

I really don't have time to play now (qtd. in Jamuna 31).

We could note here the work of Vidyasagar (1820-91) and Akshay Kumar Dutta (1820-86) in bringing together a body of literature for children. Vidyasagar, who was widely known for his

erudition and scholarship, was asked to cater to the needs of school text books when Fort William College was established in Bengal in 1800. Vidyasagar translated the Hindi *Betal Paccissi* into Bengali titling it *Betal Panchabinsati* (1827) and wrote books such as *Barna Parichay*. Akshay Kumar Dutt's *Charnpath*, a three-volume book on scientific, moral and historical writings, was a notable contribution to Bengali children's literature. The Tagore family from Calcutta had a major role to play in the development of literature for children. From Rabindranath, Abanindranath, Goganendranath, Satyendranath to the erudite ladies of the family: Swarnakumari, Saralabala and Gnanodanandini Debi, the Tagore family gave a new dimension to the emerging body of children's literature in Bengal. Tagore, in fact, experimented with several literary forms in his works for children. His short-stories such as *Kabuliwala, Postmaster, Khoka Babur Protyabartan, Atithi* are immensely popular among children as is the verse "Birpurush". Another distinguished writer is Dakshinaranjan Mitra Mazumdar whose compilation of folktales *Thakumar Jhuli* (1907) and *Thakudadar Jhuli* (1908) are immensely popular. Sukumar Roy's nonsense rhyme *Abol Tabol* (1923) deserves special mention. In recent times Bengal has had a great many writers writing for children. With a multitude of gifted writers like Satyajit Ray, Lila Mazumder, H. Kumar Roy, N. K Chatterjee and others Bengali literature for children has experimented with different styles and genres. From the traditional corpus of folk tales, poems and short stories to limericks, historical narratives, adventure stories and realistic fiction of present times, Bengal may well have the most substantial corpus of literature for children.

Children's Literature in Hindi

Hindi, one of the most widely spoken languages of the country, faces stiff competition both from other regional languages and English when it comes to the production of literature for children. Coincidentally, the birth of children's literature in Hindi and the birth of modern Hindi literature began at the same time with the publication of *Bal Bodhini* in 1874. Raja Shiva

Prasad, an inspector of schools, is specially known for works such as *Bachhon Ki Kahani* (1867) and *Ladkon Ki Kahani* (1876). One of the most-loved adventure stories for children, *Chandrakanta* (1868) by Devkinandan Khatri was also published during the period. So popular was the story among children that Nirja Guleri adapted the original work for his mega-budget television series by the same name in the mid-nineties. Appealing to the young and old alike, different versions of *Chandrakanta* are adapted even today. Writers such as Maithali Sharan Gupta, Ram Naresh Tripathi and Sohan Lal Dwivedi also wrote poetry for children. However, the towering figure in the realm of Hindi children's literature is none other than Bhartendu Harish Chandra whose *Andher Nagari* is popular till the present day. Like other Indian languages, Hindi also had its share of folk stories in translation. Some of the notable writers in this field are Prem Chand, Sudershan, Anand Kumar and Vishva Mitra Sharma. Children's magazines in Hindi were popular throughout the country, and many of them were translated into other regional languages as well. Special mention can be made of *Chandamama* (1950, 1956) in this regard. It was simultaneously published in other regional languages such as Gujarati, Kannada, Marathi, Tamil and Telegu. Magazines like *Parag* (1958) published by The Times of India Press and *Nandan* (1964) by Hindustan Times appealed to children with their multi-coloured features. Kamal Sheoran talks about the popularity of these magazines in his article "Contemporary Children's Literature in India":

> The two most popular magazines for children, Parag and Nandan, take the distinction of having the largest circulation figures in all the regional languages and English—over 130,000 each. The two magazines have been edited in time by some of the most outstanding authors of children's literature in Hindi. At present, Jai Prakash Bharathi, a prominent writer, is the editor. Modern trends can be best studied through the contents of these magazines, which because of their fine management are widely read by children ("Contemporary Children's Literature in India" 134).

Children's Literature in Post-Independence India

As already mentioned, it may be difficult, within the scope of present study, to trace the development of children's literature in all the language cultures of India. However, a certain pattern is common to most regional literatures of the country. While all regions shared an oral tradition specific to their distinct cultural ethos, a systematic body of published children's literature emerged only during the late colonial period and after independence in almost all the regional cultures of India. Besides the vast repository of folk tales, legends and stories from mythologies, biographies of eminent personalities were written in most regional languages, with a view to familiarize children with heroism and deeds of valour.

The real challenge to publications devoted to children began only after Independence, when children's literature emerged as a separate genre with notions of "child-centred approach to writing" ("Indian Children's 58). Ira Saxena observes how post-independence writers focused on the needs of the child and "insisted on writing didactically with increased reference to the lives of the young reader" (58). The period after Independence prompted writers to teach children about their folklore, mythology and culture. Special mention in this regard can be made of Anant Pai who inaugurated the famous *Amar Chitra Katha* series (AKC) in 1969 with the first comic from the series titled *Krishna*, which was written by himself. The post-independence phase also saw a rise in the establishment of publishing houses for children. Shankar Pillai, the well-known Indian political cartoonist, established the Children's Book Trust in 1957 with the aim of providing a platform to publish works for children. Pillai, who was an illustrator himself, wrote and illustrated books such as *Life with Grandfather* (1970), *Mother Is Mother* (1970) and *Kritisena* (1980). Following Pillai's footsteps, the Indian government established the *National Book Trust* in 1969 to promote books for children and inculcate the reading habit. The National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) was instituted in 1961 for the educational development of children. Consequently,

the CBT and NBT encourage writers to publish books for children ranging from fantasy, fun to adventure. As Kamal Sheoran observes:

> The Children's Book Trust has had great influence in the children's publishing industry since it is one of the few large organizations devoted solely to the promotion of higher reading standards. Books published range from classics, folk anthologies, tales from the epics, and translations into regional languages of newer titles like *Man in Khaki*, *Balloon Travel*, and *What Shall I Be*? which follow the more modern trends of children's literature in form and content. Books from the Children's Book Trust are marked by their excellent production. Books are well conceived, effectively illustrated, and attractively designed ("Contemporary Children's Literature" 135).

The Modern Period

The introduction of awards for children's literature has fuelled the interest of writers to produce quality books for children. Therefore, beginning from novels like Ruskin Bond's *Grandfather's Private Zoo* to Arup Kumar Dutta's *The Kaziranga Trail*, children's magazines like *Children's World*, *Champak* to *Tinkle* and *Target*,children's literature in India is in an expansion mode. Current children's literature can also boast of a few prolific authors who are experimenting with myriad experiences of life in their works for children, thereby breaching taboos that have marked social norms. Some contemporary works which expose the harsh realities of life to children are Paro Anand's *No Guns at my Son's Funeral*. Dilip Salwi's works experiment with the genre of science fiction for children while Ranjith Lal's works envisage an eco-critical concern. Apart from traditional and realistic works produced for children, the emergence of children's literary festival called *Bookaro* from the year 2008 has enriched the scope of children's literature in India.

However, despite the developments sketched above, the readership for children's books in both English and regional languages do not show any marked increase. The publishing industry for vernacular books in India ranks seventh in the world, whereas the publishing industry for English language books in India ranks third in the world (after the United States of America and United Kingdom). The growing popularity of English language books (non-Indian) can be traced through the Nielsen Book scan data, which conducted a survey on "Top 1000" bestseller books in India for the month of March 2012. Strikingly, no Indian origin book figured in the first 150; with R.K Narayan's *Swami and Friends* appearing at 151, *The Magic Drum and Other Favourite Stories* by Sudha Murthy (published by Puffin) at 304, Ruskin Bond's *The Kashmiri Storyteller* at 476, and the *365 Jataka Tales* at 835. On the contrary, English origin children's book like *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was at number 23 (the first children's book to make an entry in the list). Other books like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Cabin Fever, The Hungry Games and Heroes of Olympus: The Son of Neptune* were also listed in top 100. The above number tellingly reflects how a certain category of children prefer English origin books instead of regional language books or English books written by Indian writers within the country. Gauri Viswanathan, in her article "The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India" argues that English literary studies "gained enormous cultural strength through its development in a period of territorial expansion and conquest" (17). However, the striking fact is that books by English authors still retain a power, through what Robert Phillipson has termed as 'linguistic imperialism'. As Phillipson notes:

> A working definition of English linguistic imperialism is that the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. Here structural refers broadly to material properties (for example, institutions, financial

> allocations) and cultural to immaterial or ideological properties (for example, attitudes, pedagogic principles) (*Linguistic* 47).

Children's literature in India is ostensibly affected by the 'material' as well as 'ideological' properties of linguistic imperialism. But it is equally important to reflect that only a certain class and/or caste of people maintain monopoly over access to English origin books even in contemporary times. According to India's census data, 2011, 444 million children in India belong to socially disadvantaged and underprivileged backgrounds ("English or Hinglish"). Against such backdrop, it is evident that having access to English origin books is a distant dream for these underprivileged children. Discussions surrounding the English language and *Englishness* are highly contentious issues, and these are not the subject of the present study. Nonetheless, it is worth citing critics who are concerned about the impact of English colonial legacy in shaping children's worldviews. For instance, Manasi Subramaniam argues, "an Indian child who is exposed only to English fairy tales will continuously associate beauty with blonde hair, whiteness and a certain psyche… children who grew up reading Enid Blyton are more fascinated with jam scones than gulab jamuns, ham slices than samosas" ("Children's Book" 39). Subramaniam underscores the impact which childhood perceptions have on adulthood from a socio-anthropological angle in the passage below:

> Indian society is now undergoing the most radical demographic change and the books that emerge from the country must reflect this reality. Children need to develop a knowledge and worldview that appreciates the uniqueness and richness of their own culture… All children deserve to read books in which they can see themselves and the world in which they live. Reading a book need to like looking a mirror. The minute the child finds herself reflected in the books she reads, she identifies with characters, settings and situations. Once that happens, the child's understanding of the world becomes easier and smoother (38).

Subramanium's primary concern, as evident from the excerpt quoted above, is to engage children in reading stories about their own culture and society, which subsequently will help them in comprehending the larger socio-cultural milieu. In the light of Subramanium's proposal, it is pertinent to ask: Is children's literature from Assam successful in making children aware of their socio-cultural milieus? The next section of this study attempts to address this question by examining the literature produced for children in Assam from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial times.

Children's Literature in Assam: An Overview

Introduction

The current theoretical debates on Postmodernism and Cultural studies constantly alert one to the fact that no literature can exist in a vacuum, and every text emerges out of its own cultural context. Children's literature in Assam as a specific genre of literature has also emerged from a *specific context*. As Stuart Hall observes, "There's always something decentred about the medium of culture, about language, textuality, and signification…of texts as sources of power, of textuality as a site of representation and resistance, all of those questions can never be erased from cultural studies." (*The Culture Studies Reader* 106, 1999). In the light of Hall's statement, it can be argued that if meaning in a culture is generated through certain symbols and icons (signification) then children's literature in Assam acts as the signifier that generates the 'sign' of 'Assamese' culture and perhaps nationhood. But what are the culturally specific discursive constructions which enabled the formation of a distinct Assamese identity? Is children's literature a part of that 'discourse' which generates its cultural meanings? Before addressing these queries, the present chapter attempts to explore and analyse the literature associated with children in pre-Independence Assam.

Literature for Children before Print Culture

Although children's literature in Assam as a full-fledged body of work emerged in the nineteenth century colonial context of Assam, it would be wrong to say that literature meant for children never existed before the nineteenth century. The vast repository of children's literature in Assam was enriched with folk and fairy tales much before the advent of print culture. Lullabies composed especially for babies, tales narrated by grandparents in mid-summers to children sleeping under the starry blue sky, riddles that tested the mind as part of play activities for children and proverbs that teased the imagination are all part of the rich oral heritage of Assam. Some of the ballads and songs composed for children in antiquity are popular to this day. For instance, songs like '*amar e moinahubo* e' '*jonbai e etitoradia*' are sources of modern forms of Assamese songs and literature. As Indira Goswami rightly recounts, "the ancient folk literature which is equally enjoyed by children and adults—mainly comprised the ballads of *Phul Konwar* and *Moni Konwar*, short stories of *Tezimola, Tula aru Teza* and *Chilanier Jiyekar Sadhu, Garakhiyar Geet* (songs of the cowherd) and *Nichukani Geet* (lullabies)" (*Children's Literature in Indian Languages* 13). Richard B Dorson in his book *Folklore and Folklife* (1982) asserts that, "a tale is a living recitation delivered to a responsive audience for cultural purposes as reinforcement of custom and taboo, release of aggression through fantasy, pedagogical explanations of the natural world." (21). Assamese tales, songs and ballads mirror the customs, manners and tradition of pre-independence Assamese society, and also acquaint children with manners, morals and secrets of the natural world.

Perceptions of Childhood

Harekrishna Deka, in his article "The Assamese mind: contours of a landscape" (2005) makes a very interesting connection between mother nature (the land of Assam) and Krishna-Yashoda's relationship in the Vaishnavite era. To put in his words:

> The mother-child relationship as a cultural construct can be symbolically related to one's relationship with mother nature. Since the earth is a provider to a people dependent on agriculture, she is regarded as a maternal entity. The flood plains of the Brahmaputra have provided rich fertility to Assam's alluvial soil; and the rural folk here have drawn their daily sustenance from the soil and their poetic inspiration from the flora and fauna of this region" ("The Assamese Mind" 196).

Deka's conjecture is hypothetical, but it reveals an important point regarding the depiction of child Krishna in the literature of the Vaishnavite era. This point will be taken up after a brief preview of the literature produced during the times. If we were to trace the earliest written evidence of depiction of childhood in Assamese literature it would be found in the translated works of writers during the pre-Vaishnava and Vaishnava eras, the period in which Sankardeva laid the foundation for a monotheistic belief called 'eka-sarana-Harinama-dharma' breaking away from the shackles of prevailing tantra saktism. However, the most prominent among all is Sankardeva himself, who used literature as a means to attain spiritual goal. Sankardeva's Assamese rendering of *The Bhagavata* narrated the many stories of the child Krishna and out of this his *Adi Dasama* (the first part of the Book X) is immensely popular among children. As Birinchi Kumar Barua observes in his *History of Assamese Literature* (1964):

> This book describes the incidents of Krishna's early life, such as child Krishna's killing of demons, his sports, his tending of cattle with his friends in forest glades, his childish pranks such as stealing of butter, milk and curd, his quarrels with the milk-maids, and the various chastisements he had from his foster-mother Yasoda. Though permeated with religious emotion, the *Dasama* gives an intensely human and realistic picture of child life, a mother's love and grief for her little son. (24).

Likewise, Sankardeva's *Kali-damana* (*Subjugation of the Serpent Kali*), a depiction of Krishna subduing the poisonous serpent Kalia, was also popular amongst children. His *Kirtanas*, although meant for religious instruction, nevertheless delight young children with amusing stories of Krishna's childhood. For instance, in the third canto of *Kirtan Ghosa* titled "Sisulila", Sankardeva depicts the playful pranks of Krishna and the punishment he is awarded by mother Yasoda:

Ehi mote brojeaanandehari

Koronto Kriya Sishuroopdhori

Yashodara age dilekkhol

KhailonteKrishnematiakodol

Huniye Yashoda hundarihraxi

Putror hatot dhorila aaxi. (*Kirtan Ghosa* 22-28).

These lines expressively depict young Krishna's act of eating dirt and the apprehension of mother Yasoda on receiving such complaints from the Gopis. Though this story is clearly meant for adults, it explores the mother-child relationship as previously highlighted by Harekrishna Deka. At this point, it is important to note that there was no strict line of division between literature meant for children and adults during the pre-vaishnavite era. A tale such as "Sisulia", which depicts the childhood of Krishna is enjoyed by children and adults alike. To pose Deka's question once again "Why do Yashoda and Krishna, epitomising the mother-child relationship, move the Assamese people so deeply?" Although there is no definite answer to this question (except some conjectures, like the one provided by Deka) it provides some hint about the socio-cultural attitude of the Assamese people towards children. The relationship between a mother and son which is based on "childlike virtues as intensity and vivaciousness, capacity for sorrow

and delight, merciful anger and an equally quick readiness to forget and forgive injuries" places the child at an elevated pedestal in Assamese society (*The Inner World* 203). A society which adores and glorifies the child would easily associate with the Yashoda- Krishna analogy. It deifies the child as a divine being and even exalts his mischiefs and pranks as a marker of divine attributes. The discourses of 'purity' 'innocence' and association of the male child with the divine lord ostensibly validate the fact that women are not as pure, and or as divine as men, as a result of which they are prohibited even from cleansing the 'lord's prayer hall (*Sattra*). Such a discourse would validate the fact that a girl child does not deserve the amount of attention which a male child receives. Any study on decoding textuality of Assamese culture would open up numerous questions of this sort. Some of these profoundly interesting questions will be taken up later in the chapter on violence.

The eulogization of childhood can be deciphered even in the works of Madhavdeva, the disciple of Sankardeva, who wrote plays such as *The Pimpara, Guchowa, Chardhara, Bhumi Lutia*. The subject matter of these plays is again glorification of Krishna's childhood. The depiction of the child as an ideal creature, without any aversions or desires, in most of the devotional works is linked to received notions of childhood in India.

British Colonisation and literature for Children

The transition from devotional to secular literature in Assam owes much, as in other regions of India, to the advent of British colonialism. With the removal of the anti-missionary policy through the charter act of 1813, missionaries were allowed to entry into Indian territories. Although a few British missionaries tried to set up missions in different parts of the state, they could not withstand the hostile forces of the natives, and their works did not have any impact on the region. However, the entry of the American Baptist missionaries was a turning point in the cultural lives of the Assamese people. The nineteenth century is undoubtedly one of the

most tumultuous phases in the history of Assam owing to the socio-political and linguistic turmoil resulting from colonisation. As Tilottoma Misra recounts in her book *Literature and Society in Assam* (2011):

> The British annexation of Assam in 1826 was not as momentous an event in Assam's history as the events which followed this political occupation…There was a general sense of relief amongst the people at the establishment of the company's rule after the long period of anarchy and lawlessness during the Moamaria rebellion and the Burmese Invasion. But, when for political and economic convenience Assam was placed under the Bengal Presidency from 1826 to 1873, the threat to Assam's identity became manifest in tangible form… Following the yoking together of Assam and Bengal into one administrative unit, another momentous change took shape in the socio-political atmosphere of Assam… Bengali, therefore remained the official and the medium of instruction for a period of thirty-eight years from the year 1836 (164-165).

It is at this critical juncture of Assam's history, when Assam was doubly marginalized by the British and putatively by the 'alien Bengalis' that two American Baptists, Nathan Brown and Oliver T Cutter arrived at the eastern most part of Assam called Sadiya on 23 March, 1836; they would be hailed as the liberators of Assamese language and culture. Although the missionaries entered the soil with the primary aim of preaching the gospel of Christ to the masses, their activities played a greater role in shaping the future of the Assamese language. As Misra observes, "They (American Baptist Missionaries) not only espoused the cause of the Assamese as the rightful medium for vernacular education in Assam, but also sent several memoranda and petitions to the government opposing the policy of denigrating the Assamese language as a vulgar dialect of the Bengali" (*Literature and Society* 169). Besides fighting for the cause of Assamese language and literature, setting up new educational institutions for children, the Baptist missionaries pioneered a distinct type of children's literature by publishing

the first Assamese monthly magazine *Orunudoi* in 1836. It is important to note that *Orunudoi* was not a children's magazine exclusively, and it was meant for general Assamese public with certain ideological implications. Nevertheless, the advent of modern children's literature in Assam begins with *Orunudoi* which devoted a section for children, besides imparting, as the sub-title suggest, "religion, science and general intelligence" to the general public of Assam. The columns of the magazine presented stories from the Bible, stories of discovery and general events that catered to Assamese children. Some of the prominent stories which appealed to children are *Biblelor Sadhu, Yatrikar yatra* (travellers' journey), *America Aviskar* (discovery of America), *Africar Konwar* (Prince of Africa) and many others. Indira Goswami acknowledges the contribution of the American missionaries towards the development of children's literature in Assam:

> …in January 1846, they published a series of poems on the evils of opium in simple verse form. Some important publications which entertain children are 'Description of Gauhati'in 1846, 'The Greedy Fisherman', 'Nutmeg Tree', 'Locusts' in 1844, *On Wisdom* and *Various Riddles*, etc. These articles were enjoyed by both adults as well as children. The contribution of Rev. Nathan Brown, Rev. Dr Miles Bronsons, Mrs S. R Ward, Mrs Gutter, Rev Garni and Mrs Garni will always be remembered for their pioneering work in children's literature. This magazine gave a very healthy support to children's literature. ("Assamese" 17).

The publication of *Orunudoi* heralds a new phase in the cultural history of Assam. Although this magazine/journal had certain ideological implications, it proved very beneficial for the general Assamese public, particularly at a time when the very existence of the community was under threat. Though the primary aim was to propagate the word of the Lord, yet not only did it mobilize Assamese society, the sections on/for children paved the way for formation of a distinct body of literature meant for children in Assam.

Print culture and children's literature in Assam

The arrival of the American Baptists Missionaries in Assam undoubtedly played a significant role in liberating the region from the clutches of linguistic dominance of the native Bengali group over the Assamese during the colonial times. Interestingly, and quite co-incidentally one of the missionaries, Oliver T Cutter who landed in Assam in 1836 was a printer, and the other Baptist missionary who accompanied Cutter, Mr. Nathan Brown, was a linguist. The American Baptists missionaries headed by Cutter and Brown, therefore, laid the foundations of print-publishing activities in colonial Assam. Considering printing as an important part of proselytization, the American Baptist Mission Press which was first set up at Sadiya in 1836 and eventually shifted to Sibsagar in 1843, remained the only printing press in Assam till Dharma Prakash Jantra was established by an indigenous person in 1871. Although the Mission Press was chiefly established to print and publish tracts and textbooks to spread the word of the Lord it had a far-reaching effect on the Assamese language; it also facilitated book trade in colonial Assam. As Aradhana Saikia Bora notes in her dissertation *The Coming of the Book in Assam: Impact of Print*:

> The pioneering periodical in the Assamese language, the *Orunudoi*, published by the American Baptist missionaries inaugurated the emergence of a space in the public domain facilitating the easy participation of the indigenous persons in print culture and commenting on issues concerning the entire community. Second, the missionaries produced textbooks to be used in their schools. …thus, the missionaries became the trailblazers in the field of textbook production which later flowered under the aegis of the Assamese intelligentsia (82).

Although the textbooks produced by the Mission Press were not strictly children's literature, they paved the path for the production of a body of children's literature in subsequent times as

stated earlier. It is quite interesting to note how the materiality of the books, beginning from their physical properties to the advertisements enabled a book market for children during the concerned period. For instance, in the 1851 issue of *Orunudoi*, an advertisement features in the back of the magazine enlisting books for sale in the Mission Press. As the advertisement reads, “School Books for sale at the Sibsagar Mission Press. Juvenile Tracts, neatly illustrated with cuts, and particularly adapted for distribution as Reward Books in Native Schools” (Orunudoi 518). Similarly, in the June 1854 issue of the *Orunudoi,* an advertisement reads, "A few copies will remain on hand of the *Orunudoi* magazine for 1850, 51, 52. The whole, cheaply bound in one volume, cloth, forming excellent Assamese reading books for schools" (1170). The marketing of the books through advertisement encouraged, and indeed lead way for the indigenous authors and publishers to take up publishing activities to serve their own goals. Following the footsteps of the missionaries, the native authors and publishers, guided by a spirit of cultural nationalism ventured into the publication domain to contest the efforts of the missionaries as well as the native Bengali group in Assam. In this regard, mention must be made of AnandaramDekhial Phukan whose popular book for children entitled *Asamiya Lorar Mitra* was self-published at Chandrika Press, Kolkatta in 1849. The Assamese intelligentsia of the nineteenth century including Anandaram Dekhial Phukan, Hemchandra Barua, Gunabhiram Barua, and a few others got their books for children printed either in Kolkata or the Mission Press since indigenous printing activity was still at a nascent stage in Assam. Printing activity in colonial Assam, therefore, was guided by a spirit of cultural nationalism and, it was never a commercial venture. However, the later part of the nineteenth century witnessed a huge surge in printing activities where various publishers set up printing presses in Assam and printed books on various topics from the religious texts of Sankardev and Madhavdev to oral literature and books for children. The need to work for the development of the Assamese language and literature encouraged the indigenous writers, publishers, and

printers to not only publish works for the masses in general but also to publish books to instil a nationalistic awareness among children as stated earlier. Special mention may be made of the Borkotoky Company started in 1898 by Gangadhar Borkotoky and his wife which published various books for children including Sarat Chandra Goswami's *Bhugol Path*, and Harinarayan Duttabaruah's *Sishu Sahitya* in 1926. Oral folktales were compiled and published by various publishers to disseminate knowledge among young children and preserve the same for posterity. Lakshminath Bezbaroa, one of the greatest stalwarts of Assamese literature was also a publisher. His books, including his books for children such as *Burhi Aair Sadhu* were published by himself. Interestingly, Bezbaroa also owned a bookshop in Kolkata as seen in Benudhar Rajkhowa's memoir, *Mor Jivan Dapon*. As Bora notes, "it is known from the memoir of Benudhar Rajkhowa, *Mor Jivan Dapon*, that Bezbaroa also opened a bookshop in No 2 Laal Bazar Street, Kolkata" (97).

The advent of the printing press had an enormous effect on the upcoming literature produced for children. The Mission Press at Sibsagar, in this regard, served as a guiding star to the indigenous publishers, writers, printers, and book-sellers to create, publish and disseminate not only books in general but also books specially designed for children to invoke a feeling of cultural awareness. Particularly, the various sections of *Orunudoi* espoused ideas of the scientific temperament and critical inquiry, and it probably made the Assamese intelligentsia (the later founders of children's literature) aware of what is now termed as the 'discursivity of representations'. As Chris Barker notes, "representations are not innocent reflections of the real but are cultural constructions… representation is intrinsically bound up with the questions of power through the process of selection and organization that must inevitably be a part of the formation of representations" ("The Culture Studies" 177). Aijaz Ahmad, the Indian critic is highly critical of Said's Orientalism for its silence "about the ways in which western textualities may have been received, accepted, modified, challenged, overthrown or reproduced by the

intelligentsias of the colonized countries" (*In Theory* 172). Extending Ahmad's argument to the nineteenth century colonial context of Assam, it can be argued that the Assamese intelligentsia understood the insidious motive of the missionaries behind the publications of the tracts and articles in the journal. But their interest lay in employing the same 'discursivity' to subvert the cultural and linguistic hegemony of not merely the western colonizers, but of another native group, the Bengalis over the Assamese. To substantiate Ahmad's argument, it can be studied that the Assamese intelligentsia had received and modified 'western textualities' to suit their own needs. But how did the Assamese intelligentsia deploy 'representations? What is the relationship between 'representations' and emerging children's literature in Assam? Did children's literature in Assam have a subversive role in challenging Bengali hegemony in nineteenth century Assam? Was the literature produced for children the means of asserting cultural nationalism? These queries must be addressed through a discussion of the political background of colonial Assam and by examining the literature produced for children during the colonial period.

Assamese Cultural Nationalism and *Discursivity*

As stated in the preceding section, 19th century Assam was a period of tumultuous struggle. The Assamese people had hardly recovered from the bitter memories of the Burmese invasions, when the British administration, after assuming control over the land, imposed the hegemony of Bengali language over the native Assamese. As Upendra Sarma notes, "With the signing of the treaty of Yandabu in 1828 the British assumed control of the land and an uneasy peace ensued. The British established law-courts and schools; but owing to a sort of Himalayan blunder, Assamese was replaced by Bengali in schools and courts in 1837" (Sarma 16). Therefore, what began as a political struggle, subsequently resulted in socio-political, cultural, economic, educational and *linguistic* crisis (emphasis added). This 'crisis' actually awakened a sentiment among the people of Assam, which can be termed as cultural nationalism. As

Alexander J Motyl defines, "cultural nationalism is a distinct form of nationalism that seeks to celebrate, and glorify, the national culture of a community. An integral part of this national culture is, of course, the language of the community; it manifests itself in the poetry, folklore, myths, legends, epic stories, and music of a distinct linguistic and cultural group" (*Encyclopaedia of Nationalism* 107). This form of cultural nationalism in Assam was, to put in Tillottoma Misra's words "defensive in spirit, nourished by a feeling of intense insecurity" (164). The Assamese community was, therefore, "concerned with the cultural revitalization and moral regeneration of their nation …to elevate and rejuvenate the submerged moral purity of their nation's past" *(Encyclopaedia* 107). Antonio Gramsci rightly says that hegemony is domination through consent and not through coercion (*The Postcolonial Studies* 54). Over a period of time, a particular culture assimilates into the dominant culture, considering the dominant culture as morally and cultural superior to its own. It is indeed very difficult to decolonize the minds of the dominated community, because the dominated 'subject' colludes with hegemonic structure and is no longer open to resistance. Against such a backdrop, 'cultural revitalization' and 'moral regeneration' is highly imperative on the part of the subjugated nation. In a similar vein, the strong current of Assamese nationalism in the nineteenth century was a direct effect of the prevailing Bengali hegemony in the state. Lakshminath Bezbaroa, in his autobiography *Mur Jivan Xuworan* notes how people assumed Bengali culture was a status marker during the colonial period in Assam. In the fourth chapter of his autobiography, Bezbaroa narrates how his friends and contemporaries were adept at reciting Bengali prose and poetry, and how they looked down upon people who did not possess that learning and art. Bezbaroa provides anecdotes to reflect on the way the youth of colonial Assam mimicked Bengali cultural forms and manners:

> Bengali language and songs, dressing habits and lifestyle, overall Bengali fashion had an enormous impact on the youth of those times. The youth was inflicted by a

> psychological complex that Bengali culture is superior to Assamese culture in all aspects. The intensity of that complex was so high that, even in certain ancient *sattras* of Assam, traditional Assamese *bhaonas* were replaced by Bangla *jatra pal gaan* (a mobile theatrical performance) *(Mur Jivan Xuworan* 32-33).

Drawing on Althusser, Simon During discusses how dominant cultural values operate through ideology. To put in his words, "for Althusser, individuals can be sucked into ideology so easily because it helps them make sense of the world, to enter the "symbolic order" and ascribe power to themselves. They identify with ideology because they see themselves pictured as independent and strong in it…dominant social values are internalized through this kind of identification" (*The Culture Studies Reader* 5, 1999). In a similar stance, it can be argued 'being sucked into ideology' the Assamese youth of Bezbaroa's times found identification with the dominant Bengali cultural forms empowering. Although the socio-political current of the nineteenth century brought about tremendous impact on the culture of Assam, especially in terms of linguistic hegemony, it would an over-simplified statement that Bengali language and culture was always resisted by the natives. In fact, Bezbaroa in his autobiography provides ample evidence to show how Bengali language and culture had a substantial influence on the intelligentsia and the common people of colonial Assam. In the seventh chapter of his autobiography, *Mur Jivan Xuworan* (2013) Bezbaroa reflects on how the intellectual ambience of Calcutta infused the nationalistic spirits of the budding intellectuals of Assam. A similar view is reiterated by Sanjib Baruah as he states "Calcutta was then, a dynamic centre of learning that gave intellectual stimulation and strength to the educated aspiring youths of Assam who became the bedrock of the Assamese middle class" (*India Against Itself* 60). In this regard it may be seen that Assamese intellectuals like Anandaram Dekhial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Chandra Kumar Agarwala, Lakshminath Bezbaroa and many others were undoubtedly influenced by the Bengali Renaissance. These intellectuals were adept in Bengali, Assamese

and the emerging English literature and culture and they never undermined the rich heritage of Bengali literature and culture. But paradoxically, their knowledge of Bengali and western literatures also made them aware of the hegemonic power structures at work, as a result of which they were not swayed by Bengali tradition and culture. Bezbaroa cites a certain anecdote where he was asked to work for the cause of Bengali language and literature by his Bengali-in-laws, on the ground that Assamese is an unpolished dialect of Bengali language, and it was not worth fighting for the cause of Assamese language (*Mur Jivan Xuworan* 119). However, Bezbaroa's reply was quite interesting. He asserted "They have caught a tartar in me. I disappointed them greatly" (Bezbaroa 119). What is striking is the fact that, despite its resistance to Bengali culture colonial Assam was substantially influenced by Bengali literature. It is against the backdrop of the all-pervasive Bengali influence as well as Bengali hegemony that cultural nationalism in Assam was generated through a mode of 'discursive representation'. This discursive narrative was also produced through the formation of a distinct body of children's literature, a culture specific literature which would consequently help in inculcating values of a distinct Assamese ethos and tradition, and perpetuate the same among the children of Assam. With the sole aim of disseminating and perpetuating Assamese cultural values, activists and writers such as Anandaram Dekhial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Hemchandra Barua, Lakshminath Bezbaroa and others led the formation of a distinct children's literature.

In a different cultural context Elizabeth A Galway in her book *From Nursery Rhymes to Nationhood: Children's Literature and the Construction of Canadian Identity* convincingly argues that children's books published between 1876 and 1911 in Canada, endorse strong patriotic zeal. The patriotic themes embedded in children's literature of Canada were a conscious attempt on the part of the writers to generate nationalistic fervour amongst young children. Galway's book is significant because it reveals insights about the construction of

national identity through children's literary canon. Drawing on Galway's insightful book it can be argued that the Assamese intelligentsia also attempted to construct an Assamese identity by forming a body of children's literature as mentioned above. However, while doing so it deployed a discursive agency to subvert the all-pervading Bengali hegemony prevailing during the times. In this regard, Anandaram Dekhial Phukan can be regarded as the progenitor of children's literature in Assam whose *Asamiya Lorar Mitra* and *Lora Bandhu* attempt to fill the vacuum in the field of Assamese school books. The fact that Anandaram Dekhial Phukan intends to deploy 'discursivity' to generate a nationalistic zeal among children is evident from his "Preface" to *Asamiya Lorar Mitra* (friend of Asamiya boys). As Phukan asserts, "It is much easier to acquire knowledge through the medium of vernacular language than through a foreign; and it is with a view in some measure of supplying this deficiency that the compilation of the present series has been undertaken (*Asamiya Lorar* xi)." Phukan was alert to the ubiquitous influence of Bengali on the youth of those times. Therefore, in a very subtle and nuanced manner he addresses the young boys of colonial Assam and tells them the significance of acquiring knowledge in one's mother tongue. He beckons young Assamese boys to the world of knowledge by asserting that, "it contains not only narrative and didactic pieces but it affords information on various other subjects chiefly on Geography, History and brief sketches of the Christian and Mahomedan religions have been likewise inserted (*Asamiya Lorar* viii)." The American Missionaries' attempt to proselytize through the medium of 'representations' (tracts published in Orunudoi) paved the way for people like Anandaram Dekhial Phukan to deploy 'discursivity' in order to inculcate a cultural nationalism amongst children in particular. As future citizens of a nation children are the carriers of the cultural legacy of a nation's past, and Phukan through various 'representations' not only attempted to provide encyclopaedic knowledge but also sought to perpetuate cultural awareness among the children. In this regard, Anandaram Dekhial Phukan's *Asamiya Lorar Mitra* can be regarded as the first full-fledged

book for children in Assam. Besides Phukan, writers such as Padmanath Gohain Baruah, Panindranath Gogoi, Durga Prasad Mazindar and many others attempted to fill a void by publishing books such as *Niti Siksha*, *Sahitya Sangra*, *Uju Kobita* and others. Although these books were primarily published as textbooks, they can be considered as valuable contributions to the emerging field of children's literature in Assam.

Likewise, Lakshminath Bezbaroa also felt the need to preserve the 'culture' and 'tradition' of Assam for children of future generations. Bezbaroa attempted to excavate the 'sadhu kotha' as the Grimms' Brother had done almost a hundred years back in Germany to instil a sense of German nationalism among the common 'volk'. Like the Grimms Brothers, Bezbaroa also believed that folktales embody the cultural ethos of a community and provide evidence of the 'national character' of people. Bezbaroa's assertion of cultural nationalism is evident from the connection he makes between folk literature and nationalism in his introduction to the anthology of *Burhi Aair Sadhu* (1911). As Bezbaroa states in the introduction, "the way the members of a community, irrespective of being literate or illiterate, civilized or uncouth, wise or ignorant leave everlasting marks in their language, a community's old fables and folk tales also bear lasting impressions of age-old mannerisms, conventions, thinking and imagination of all members of the community" (*Intro* trans.). Against the backdrop of 19th century turmoil, which we have discussed above, Bezbaroa, could have not found anything better than the folk tale motif "to provide evidence of their continuity and national distinctiveness" (*Folkloristics* 40) of the Assamese community. As Madan M Sarma and Debarshi P Nath note in the Introduction to their edited book, *Lakshminath Bezbaroa- The Architect of Modern Assamese Literature: Issues of Nationalism and Beyond*, "a writer with a passionate love for his motherland Assam and for the Assamese language, Bezbaroa was a leader of the Assamese cultural nationalism. Always excited by various facets of human life and nature, Bezbaroa used his creative genius to explore newer possibilities of life" (iv). Bezbaroa used his creativity to

consciously build up, "resistance against colonial values and ideology" (v) as Sarma and Nath succinctly put it. Like *Burhi Aair Sadhu,* Bezbaroa also employs 'discursivity' through the narrative technique of *Koka Deuta aru Nati Lora*, another important collection of folktales for children by Bezbaroa. An interesting fact about *Koka Deuta* is the conversation which takes place at the beginning of every tale. When the grandchild requests the grandfather to narrate him stories, the grandfather agrees to do so only on the condition that he has to excel in his studies and conduct himself well. At a time when the educational scenario of Assam was in crisis, Bezbaroa's stress on the importance of education through the act of narration (discursivity) is indeed noteworthy. From this brief discussion it is clear that the very attempt of the writers to produce a culture specific literature specially intended for children involves discursivity.

Besides the *sadhu kotha* or folktales, the corpus of poems intended for children also attempted to instil a sense of cultural awareness among children. Special mention may be made of Atul Chandra Hazarika, in this regard, whose poems for children demonstrate a strong sense of cultural nationalism. For instance, some of his poems such as "Anjali", "Amar Dekh", "Mur Dekh Bhal", "Aai" among a few others from his anthology of poems for children titled *Runuk Jhunuk* glorify Assam as a region that could captivate the world by her charm. His poem "Anjali" depicts his love for his motherland, Assam:

> Oh! how dear is my mother tongue.
>
> How dear is my country,
>
> O my lovely motherland, Assam!
>
> You are fascinating.
>
> A land worth revering,

A land worth praising,

A land greater than heaven,

How shall I pay obeisance to you? (*Atul Chandra Hazarika Sishu Sahitya Samagra* 755).

It is interesting to note that although the pan-Indian political nationalistic consciousness did find minimal expression in the works of Atul Chandra Hazarika such as his biographies for children, a substantial body of his works for children deals with issues of nationalism pertaining to the local regional scenario. For instance, his poem "Mur Dekh Bhal" (My country is good) talks about 'country' in a regional and, more culture-specific sense:

My country is better than all countries,

To whose feet I pay my utmost respects forever.

Where on earth does such golden soil exist?

Where on earth do such clearest crystal streams flow?

Where on earth do such treasures dwell in forest?

Where on earth do you find *eri- muga* silk?

My country is better than all countries (*Atul Chandra Hazarika Sishu Sahitya Samagra* 757).

The country Hazarika is referring to is undoubtedly his mother-land, Assam, as exemplified from his usage of culture specific terms such as 'eri', 'muga', 'habibononi', etc. Apart from his patriotic poems, Hazarika also produced poetry in a light and musical verse with themes relating to animals, birds and everyday world which would familiarise children with Assam's ecology. For instance, his poems such as "Aamar Gaon" (Our Village), "Gos" (Tree), "Pokhila"

(Butterfly), among a few others hold significance in their attempt to represent the environment in relation to Assamese culture and tradition. Poems such as "Aamar Gaon" would not only provide a pictorial description of any Assamese rural village, but it would also familiarize children with ecological specificities. Similarly, the literary works of Navakanta Barua, Chandrakumar Agarwala, Ananda Chandra Agarwala, Durga Prasad Mazinder, Prafulladutta Goswami, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, and Gagan Chandra Adhikari in subsequent times also evoke a sense of cultural awareness. Apart from the works mentioned above, the mellifluous songs of Bishnu Prasad Rabha and Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi are an intrinsic part of the cultural landscape. Thus, the various writers who wrote for children beginning from Anandaram Dhekial Phukan to Bezbaroa and others in subsequent times attempted to strengthen the nation building process in colonial Assam through their literary endeavours. As Bezbaroa states in his concluding remarks to his presidential address to the Asom Sahitya Sabha in December 1924:

> Friends! On this day of joy, in this festival of literary taste, let us all succeed in our life and thereby make our lives worthy by applying our innate strength for the uplift of our land and our nation, …this service to our mother tongue is the service to our land; the joyous flag of victory of our national life—the revival of our lost glory and the crown of our life-long responsibility (qtd. in *Lakshminath Bezbaroa: The Architect of Assamese Literature* 4).

Borrowing Bezbaroa's articulation, it can be argued that the writers of the colonial era must have felt the urgency to bestow this 'life-long responsibility' of uplifting their nation and culture to the future citizens-to-be i.e., the children and, eventually the collective endeavours of these writers led to the formation of a distinct body of literature for children. The body of children's literature in Assam was, therefore, not produced in a vacuum.

Conclusion

A historical trajectory of children's literature in the West, in India, and in Assam makes it evident that like any other national/geographical literatures, children's literature is also produced in a specific context. Though seemingly innocent, children's literature inheres socio-political and cultural underpinnings. Be it a strong puritanical, Theo-centric educational doctrine in the West or a nationalistic agenda in the Indian-subcontinent, children's literature is not free from ideological implications at any given period and time. Since ideology plays a crucial role in forming or constructing knowledge, it is worth analysing the important role that children's literature as a marker of cultural values, plays in reiterating, transmitting and/or subverting certain ideologies. In this regard, the next three chapters attempts to discern the sexist, ableist, speciesist and other ideologies in children's literature emanating from Assam.

NOTES

1. '*Amar e moinahubo e'* or 'my little baby sleeps now' is one of the most popular lullabies in Assam sung till the present day. '*Jonbai e etitoradia'* which can be translated as O moon! Give me a shining star, is another popular lullaby in Assamese language.

2. Kirtan Ghosa is a collection of devotional verse composed by the Assamese saint-poet Srimanta Sankardev to preach the miracles of Lord Krishna to the masses.

3. The lines "*ehi mote broje anande hari… hatot dhorila aaxi*" is written in Brajawali language by Sankardeva, and it depicts the way Krishna, in the guise of a child, plays pranks with his mother Yashoda and others. Someone complains to Yashoda that Krishna has eaten a lump of dirt. On hearing this, Yashoda laughingly catches hold of her son's hands. Krishna's might is explained in the lines wherein he opens his mouth, and his mother sees the entire universe peeping through his mouth.

4. *Sattras* which literally means 'holy areas' are monastic institutions established during the neo-vaishnavite reformist movement in Assam in the 16$^{th\ C}$ by Srimanta Sankardev. The *Sattras* are not just religious monasteries but are important sites of performing arts in Assam.

5. *Bhaona* is a traditional form of theatrical performance introduced by Srimanta Sankardev in the 16th century. It is one of the performing art forms in Assam popular even till date. The sole aim of *bhaonas* was to convey religious messages to the people.

6. *BurhiAair Sadhu* (Grandmother's Tales) is the earliest collection of written folktales in Assam, compiled, and published by Lakshminath Bezbaroa in 1911.

7. *Koka Deutaaru Nati Lora* (Grandfather and Grandson) is another collection of folktales compiled by Lakshminath Bezbaroa in 1913.

[8.] '*eri*' and '*muga*' are different varieties of silk found in Assam.

[9.] '*habibononi*' refers to the dense thick forests of Assam.

[10.] Asom Sahitya Sabha is one of the most important literary-cultural organizations of the Indian state, Assam formed in the year 1917 for the development of Assamese language, literature, and culture.

Chapter III

Disability in Folk and Fairy Tales of Assam

Introduction

Disability Studies is a newly emergent and increasingly important field of study. However, it was only in the 1970's when social scientists and academicians took interest in the general area of disability. As Mike Oliver observes in his ground-breaking study, *The Politics of Disablement* (1990) "disability did not occupy a central or even marginal place on the sociological agenda, notwithstanding cultural studies and medical sociology. In the subsequent years, disability has been taken seriously and quite actively as an analytical topic and social category for study and political action in Britain, Canada, and the United States" (3). The growing interest in disability in academia has triggered the interest of academicians to examine the nature, scope, and definition of the newly emergent field. According to Barnes, Oliver, and Barton, "disability is both a common personal experience and a global phenomenon, with widespread economic, cultural and political implications for society as a whole. People with accredited impairments have existed since the dawn of time, and have had a presence in all societies" (*Disability Studies Today* 2). The above definition necessitates our understanding that although 'disability' as a field of study had its origin in the West, concurrently with various political and social upheavals, the concept of disability as a 'mere lack' or 'restricted bodily impairment' has always been there in all societies across the globe. When it comes to the Indian scenario, the critical inquiry of disability as a knowledge domain has been a very recent phenomenon. Nonetheless, the field has reached myriad diversities, from its emergence in America to politicization in Britain; from its medical model and social model to the cultural model of disability, from its 'wrestle for social recognition' to its 'petition for cultural representations'. Considering the interdisciplinary scope of the field, the present chapter

attempts to explore ‘disability’ in terms of characters, themes, and narratives as represented in the folk tales of Troloikyeswari Devi Baruani and Lakshminath Bezbaroa. In this regard, the chapter attempts to address some pertinent questions such as; what is the location of ‘disabled’ characters in the world of Assamese folktales? How does a society construct a character’s (his/her) difference as a disability? Why do the characters with physical impairment aspire to fit into an 'able-bodied norm'? What does it tell us about the Assamese community's engagement with disabled and non-disabled persons?

In order to analyze the above-mentioned questions, it becomes imperative to borrow theoretical inputs from different models of disability. Section-I of the chapter, therefore, provides a brief overview of different models of disability and explores how the notion of ‘ableism’ is often used to prescribe constructions of normalcy. Section-II of the chapter examines the relationship between ‘representations’ and disability. It attempts to analyze how Assamese folktales are loaded with ‘ableist ideology’. It further seeks to delineate how the ‘non-normative body’ is often linked to the concept of ‘otherness’ as represented in the folktales of Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Troliekewsari Devi Baruani. Section-III of the chapter examines the subversive potential in the folktales of the concerned writers. It attempts to observe how most of the tales challenge and subvert social constructions of disability. Section-IV of the chapter traces the gendered patterns as represented in the folktales of Bezbaroa and Baruani. In this regard, the chapter also seeks to explore notions of disability in relation to Baruani’s lived experience of disability.

A Brief Overview of Different Models of Disability

For a long time, disability had strictly been the preserve of medicine and psychology. According to Alice Hall, in the medical model "disability was understood as a deficit residing in the individual" (*Literature and Disability* 21). The medical model perceives disability as a pathology or as a problem that is necessarily in need of a cure, rehabilitation, or concealment (21). The medical model assumes one's impairment and its clinical definitions to be the ultimate ones. It potentially rules out the possibility of escaping from the final worldview backed by science and medicine. As Dan Goodley observes, "disability is normatively understood through the gaze of medicalisation: that process where life becomes processed through the reductive use of medical discourse" (*Dis/ability Studies* 4). Quoting Couser, Goodley further opines that although medicine has given many (disabled) people their lives it also "tends to demystify and naturalize somatic anomaly, stripping away any supernatural or moral significance and characterizing physical variation solely as a matter that science may investigate and attempt to remedy" (qtd. in Goodley 4). Couser highlights how the medical discourse of disability relies solely on 'biological', 'genetic', 'hormonal', 'neurological', and 'physiological' aspects. As opposed to this medicalization and individualization of disability model, scholars, and activists of various disciplines such as sociology, social policy, education, humanities, and cultural studies, under the influence of various civil rights campaigns and paradigms put forward an alternative model of disability known as the 'social model'. As Alice Hall observes, "activists and scholars put forward a social model, sometimes called the 'social-constructionist' model of disability. This model emphasized the public and structural aspects of disability and heightened the status of people with disabilities as a historically oppressed group. This social model makes a key distinction between 'impairment' and 'disability' (Hall, 22). The social model perceives all impairments to be a naturally occurring phenomenon. But it is the 'structural variations' which impose disability on people. The distinction between

'impairment' and 'disability was originally made by Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), an early disability rights organization in the UK, which eventually led to the development of the social model. The UPIAS defines Impairment as "lacking part or all of a limb or having a defective limb, organ, or mechanism of the body" (Hall 22). Disability, on the other hand, is "the disadvantage, or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes little or no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities" (qtd. in Hall 22). As opposed to the medical model where impairment is seen as a pathologized medical issue, the social model, therefore, says that disability is created through a social process. As Hall further opines, "Society 'disables' individuals by excluding or discriminating against them and creating affective, sensory, cognitive or architectural barriers" (*Literature* 22). This social model was used as an important tool by disability rights activists in subsequent times. However, despite the merits and worth of the social model, it somewhat turned out to be a 'little dusky' in contemporary times. The social model has often been criticized for "neglecting cultural imagery, certain personal experiences, and the impacts of impairment" ("Disability Goes Cultural" 21). As Dan Goodley puts it, "intriguingly the social model turned disability-as-impairment to disability-as-oppression" (*Dis/ability* 7). Goodley further asserts that "what is lost in the social model is the idea of disability as an entity around which people orient themselves as an identity. An identity that might be celebrated as it disrupts norms and subverts values of society" (7). Considering the limitations of the social model various scholars such as Tom Shakespeare, Lennard J Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and many others have called for greater attention to cultural representations of disabled people. According to Anne Waldschmidt, the cultural model of disability differs from other approaches in certain important aspects. She examines that the cultural model "considers disability neither as only an individual fate, as in the individualistic-reductionist model of disability, nor as merely an

effect of discrimination and exclusion, as in the social model. Rather, this model questions the other side of the coin, the commonly unchallenged 'normality', and investigates how practices of (de)normalization results in the social category we have come to call 'disability'" ("Disability Goes Cultural" 24). The cultural disability studies model, therefore, provides a new perspective on issues of disability and normality by describing disability as a discursive entity rather than a given entity or event. In the words of Waldschmidt:

> This model considers impairment, disability, and normality as effects generated by academic knowledge, mass media, and everyday discourses… In any culture at any given moment these classifications are dependent on power structures and the historical situation; they are contingent upon and determined by hegemonic discourses… By assuming a constructivist and discursive character of disability, the historical contingency and cultural relativity of inclusion and exclusion, stigmatization and recognition can come into consideration, as well as socio-cultural patterns of experience and identity, meaning-making and practice, power, and resistance ("Disability Goes Cultural" 24-25).

The cultural model, therefore, highlights the fact that the identities of 'disabled' and 'non-disabled' are interdependent. Disability as such is not a fixed essentialist condition but it exists only within a 'dichotomous framework of bodily difference' (Waldschmidt) within a given culture and historical time.

The Interplay between 'Normality' and 'Disability'

Lennard J. Davis in his "Introduction" to *The Disability Studies Reader* states that, "to understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body" ("Introduction: Normality" 1). He further opines that "the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the

disabled person" (1). Davis' definition elucidates how the exclusion or discrimination of disabled people results from the social construction of normalcy. However, the concept of normalcy itself is a modern invention. Davis examines how the roots of normalcy are found in the statistical analysis, eugenics, and evolutionary theories of Karl Pearson and Francis Galton in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century thought. As Davis puts in his “Introduction: Normality, Power and Culture”:

> What these revisions by Galton signify is an attempt to redefine the concept of the ‘ideal’ in relation to the general population. First, the application of the idea of a norm to the human body creates the idea of deviance or a ‘deviant’ body. Second, the idea of a norm pushes the normal variation of the body through a stricter template guiding the way the body ‘should’ be. Third, the revision of the ‘normal curve of distribution’ into quartiles, ranked in order, and so on, creates a new kind of ‘ideal’. …The new ideal of ranked order is powered by the imperative of the norm, and then is supplemented by the notion of progress, human perfectibility, and the elimination of deviance, to create a dominating, hegemonic vision of what the human body should be (5).

This long, yet insightful paragraph, explains how the concept of the 'ideal' was eventually replaced by the concept of 'normal' in modern times. While the concept of the 'ideal' is a state which humans could only long for, but not easily attain (as it presents a mytho-poetic state of being that is connected to the gods); the concept of normal on the other hand, is loaded with a burden. As Davis rightly says, "the concept of the norm, unlike that of an ideal, implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm" ("Introduction" 3). The idea of the 'normal' simultaneously gave space to the concept of its binary opposite the 'deviant'. Put in Davis' words, "when we think of bodies, in a society where the concept of the norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants" (3). Davis argues that with the advancement of scientific theories and modern progression, the idea of the 'normal

individual' emerged in society, and, “eugenics became obsessed with the elimination of 'defectives', a category which included the 'feebleminded', the deaf, the blind, the physically defective, and so on" (3). Thus, the pseudoscientific theories of humanity and the population of the early twentieth century evoked the sensibility of the ‘average individual’ by viewing the ‘norm-as-average-as-natural', according to Davis. The eugenic notions of normativity by definition creates the 'abnormal', the 'other', and the 'disabled'. To paraphrase Davis, "disability sits in direct opposition to normalcy which constitutes, conforming to, not deviating or different from, the common type of standard, regular, usual" (qtd. in Goodley 12). A similar view is reiterated by Rosmarie Garland-Thomson in her usage of the term ‘normate’ which she defines as “the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (“Disability, Identity and Representation” 8). The notion of the ‘normate’, according to Thomson, also constructs the ‘cultural other’ figures such as “the cripple, the quadroon, the queer, the outsider, the whore” (8). The normative values set by society change the social lives and relationships of the 'cultural other' by a process Erving Goffman label as 'stigma'. Referring to the people who conform to societal expectancy as ‘normals' Goffman traces how the identity of the 'abnormal' is constructed through a 'stigma theory'. To put it in Goffman's words:

> By definition, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the dangers he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class. We use specific stigma terms such as cripple, bastard, and moron in our daily discourse as a source of metaphor and imagery, typically without giving thought to the original meaning (*Stigma* 5).

The term ‘we’ is used by Goffman to refer to the non-stigmatized people which he calls the ‘normals’. Stigma, according to Goffman is created “through the interaction between a person and their social context, in the relationship between the stigmatiser and the stigmatised” (qtd. in Hall 22). The stigmatiser, in the light of the above definition, are the 'normals’ who label ‘disgrace’ upon the ‘abnormals’ such as the ‘blind’, ‘deaf’ ‘crippled’ ‘deformed’ ‘disfigured’ etc. Goffman’s perception of ‘stigma’ feeds very well into the later discourses of ‘normalcy’ and ‘disability’. The centring of ‘normalcy’ also gives undue privilege to the ‘able-bodied’ thereby constructing its binary opposite, the ‘disabled’. The concept of disability, therefore, is contingent upon the term ‘able-bodied’. The privilege of ‘able-bodiedness’ over ‘disability’ eventually gives rise to the concept of ‘ableism’, a term which assumes that “all disabled people aspire to an able-bodied norm, that disabled people are inferior to non-disabled people, and that disability defines and determines an individual’s characteristics” (Linton 9). This notion of ableism is so deeply entrenched into our 'collective consciousness that it can instil potential bias on any form of deviancy from the 'norm'. To decipher how a culture responds and/or reacts to the notion of ableism and disability, it is indeed necessary to unravel and explore certain cultural sites, such as 'representations' from a disability studies perspective. The next section, therefore, attempts to explore the relationship between disability and representations.

Disability and Representation

Tom Shakespeare is one of the earliest critics to shed light on the cultural representations of disabled people. Shakespeare highlights how disabled people are objectified through certain cultural representations across genres. Citing examples from texts ranging from classical drama to popular cartoon characters such as Porky Pig, Shakespeare points to the ubiquity of disability imagery within the wider spectrum of literary and cultural representations. The objectification of disabled people is based on the power premise as it "enables able-bodied people to feel good about themselves; by demeaning disabled people, non-disabled people can feel both powerful,

and generous. Disabled people, on the other hand, are viewed as passive and incapable people, objects of pity and of aid" ("Cultural Representation" 288). The stereotypes of the disabled as 'powerless', 'needy' and 'inferior', etc are further reiterated through certain ‘representations. As Rosmarie Garland- Thomson boldly asserts, “stereotypes in life become tropes in textual representation” (“Disability, Identity” 11). Commenting on how representation relies upon cultural assumptions, Thomson further opines:

> Such portrayals invoke, reiterate, and are reinforced by cultural stereotypes. A highly stigmatized characteristic like disability gains its rhetorical effectiveness from the powerful, often mixed responses that real disabled people elicit from readers who consider themselves normates. The more the literary portrayal conforms to the social stereotype, the more economical and intense the effect; representation thus exaggerates an already highlighted physical difference…Focussing on a body feature to describe a character throws the reader into a confrontation with the character that is predetermined by cultural notions about disability… representation tends to objectify disabled characters by denying them any opportunity for subjectivity or agency (11).

Garland-Thomson’s definition has two-fold implications. On the one hand, it examines how literary and cultural production helps in creating and reconstructing notions of ‘cultural otherness’; on the other hand, she argues how such narratives or 'representations' in turn influence and shape the identity or the 'lived reality' of people with impairments. If representations have the potentiality to ‘attach meaning to bodies’ (Thomson 5) then it becomes imperative to not only decipher tropes of disability in texts but also to adopt a critical stance to it. In this regard, it is apt to quote Alice Hall who boldly asserts that, "disability not only ‘demands a story’ but also that language matters” (*Literature and Disability* 8). Like Rosemarie Garland- Thomson, Hall also states that "language matters not merely as a question of political correctness, but because it shapes expectations and it conveys models and conceptions of

disability that are fundamental to how disabled identities and agency are experienced" (8). For Hall, disability is, therefore, embedded within the larger power structures of language and narratives, and those 'structures' can be unravelled by taking a literary-theoretical stance on the issue of 'disability'. Language, therefore, becomes necessary "to critique, challenge and rewrite the stories and structures through which disabilities have been traditionally understood" (Hall 9). Literary and theoretical analysis of disability is crucial because it offers us a new way to look back at the canon, which has informed and shaped our traditional understanding of the 'disabled other'. Such a study would, in the words of Alice Hall:

> Invite readers to think about processes of empathy, identification, and the ways in which disability reconfigures our relationship to the materiality of texts and forms literary writing. Literary and theoretical writing about disability provides a fresh critical category, access to new forms of knowledge, and a means of examining the narratives through which we give shape and meaning to our lives" (*Literature and Disability* 16).

The nuanced perspectives of critical disability scholars like Hall and Thomson alert us to the 'discursive' aspect of narratives. However, if representations play a significant role in perpetuating certain 'ideology', what role does a seemingly innocent genre, such as children's literature play in disseminating ableist ideology? To answer the above query, the next part of this chapter attempts to examine the narratives emanating from the folk world of Assam from a critical-disability studies perspective.

Ableist Ideology and Folk Tales

The types of literature to which children are exposed are likely to shape their general perceptions of society, in later life. In this regard, folk and fairy tales, though seemingly innocent, play a very crucial role in propagating certain ideologies. The ideological imperatives of fairy tales are outlined by Jack Jipes in his book, *The Art of Subversion* where he states that

"the purpose of fairy tales was to endow the child with a sense of morals and codes of conduct for behaviour" (27). Citing the example of Charles Perrault, Zipes observes that "Perrault amalgamated folk and literary motifs and shaped them in a unique way to present his particular bourgeois view of social manners" (27). Similarly, Christina Bacchilega perceives fairy tales as "ideologically variable desire machine" (*Fairy Tales Transformed* 4). Interestingly, although various strands of ideology like bourgeois ideology, feminist ideology, etc., have been explored by fairy tale critics and scholars, the issues of disability have often been overlooked in fairy tale scholarship. As Ann Schmiesing observes, "disability issues have occasionally been overlooked because fairy-tales' scholars have narrowly viewed images of disability in the tales only as the literalization of metaphor" (*Disability, Deformity, and Disease* 6). However, considering the proliferation of representations of disability in folk and fairy tales, it would be inappropriate to examine *disability* merely from the figurative dimension. While Lennard Davis traces the roots of 'disabled representations' to the eighteen and nineteen-century novels, AtoQuayson counters him by stating that the binaries of normal/abnormal appeared much earlier than Davis states. To put it in Quayson's words:

> It is not entirely accurate that the binary of normal/abnormal starts with the eighteenth-nineteenth century novels or indeed that they inaugurate the plots of the deformation of social status. On the contrary, as can be shown from an examination of folktales from all over the world, the plot of physical and/or social deformation is actually one of the commonest starting points of most story plots, so much so that it is almost as if the deformation of physical and/or social status becomes the universal starting point for the generation of narrative emplotment as such ("Aesthetic Nervousness" 205-206).

Extending Quayson's insight into the folk world of Assam, it can be observed that folk narratives emanating from the regional scenario of Assam also abound with ableist ideology. The small stature of characters such as *Ebegotia*, the physically anomalous birth of *Ou Kunwori*

(Elephant Apple Maiden), the physical impairment of *Teja* resulting from the spell of a malevolent figure, the night blindness of *Kukuri Kona*, the blindness of *Kona* and hunchback of *Kuja*, the cognitive impairment or intellectual/mental disability of dummy character *Ramdhan*, the ugliness of *Bandori*, the Obesity of *Chawalpuria* (Rice-eater), all these tales reflect the manner in which disability is linked with the concept of 'otherness'. These tales showcase how society constructs his/her difference as a disability, and how these characters with physical impairment should aspire to fit into an 'able-bodied norm'.

Disability and the Grotesque

The co-relation between disability and the grotesque is often highlighted in literature and cultural forms where distorted and deranged bodies are referred to as grotesques. As Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund argue in their book *Grotesque*, "grotesque bodies are, at times, incomplete, lacking in vital parts, as they sometimes have pieces cut out of them, limbs are missing…in some cases the grotesque figures combine human, non-human, animal attributes as in the case of Sir Hugo… and in some other cases, the corporeal deformity consists of extra body parts" (2). The manifestation of the grotesque in corporeal otherness aligns it with the disabled who lacks unity and does not fit in the human framework of able-bodiedness. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson observes:

> All persons with physical disabilities thus embody the "illegitimate fusion" of the cultural categories "normal," which qualifies people for human status, and "abnormal," which disqualifies them. Within this liminal space the disabled person must constitute something akin to identity. According to the principle of unity, the disabled person becomes grotesque either in the sense of a gargoyle, breaching boundaries, or in the sense of a eunuch, one who is incomplete, not whole (*Extraordinary Bodies* 115).

The attributes of the grotesque as lacking in unity, disproportionate or "repulsively ugly or distorted" as the OED defines are vital to the folk and fairy tales. The folktales from Assam also abound with physically disabled characters who are 'disharmonious' 'filthy' and 'excessive'- some of the marked features of the grotesque. *Ebegotia* a character of Troloikyeswari Devi Baruani's story of the same name is projected as a filthy and disharmonious being because of his diminutive size. *Ebegotia* is therefore, a grotesque figure whose physicality 'hurt the eyes' that witness him. *Ou kunwori* from Bezbaroa's *Burhi Aair Sadhu* is another grotesque character who is stigmatized and ostracized by her royal family for possessing a vegetable body which is not 'right' and 'proper' according to the normative girth of the human body. Chawalpuria from Troloikyeswari Baruani's *Sadhu Katha* is another grotesque figure who is 'repulsively ugly' and whose presence engenders a feeling of what Ato Quayson terms as 'aesthetic nervousness'. The folk and fairy tales from Assam, therefore, project many disabled characters who corresponds to what critics define as the grotesque. Unfortunately, most of the grotesque figures with distorted bodies fade into 'black humour' where their lived obstacles of disability are given a comic twist in the stories.

In order to see how the grotesque figures, or in other words the 'disabled other' is culturally constructed, and how some of them challenge and break the 'norm' of abled-bodiedness, the folktales by Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Troloikyeswari Devi Baruani are critically analysed in the next sections.

Portrayals of Disability in Assamese *Sadhu katha*

In his book *Ballads and Tales of Assam* Prafulla Dutta Goswami states, "the Assamese term for an oral tale is *sadhu katha*, usually derived from the Sanskrit *sadhu*, a merchant, and *katha*, a tale, meaning thereby that the *sadhu katha* is a tale told by a wandering merchant (*Rachanawali* 127). From the etiological tales (tales of causes) of *Mikir* and *Miri* tribes to the

trickster tales of *teton*, from the wonder tales of fairies and witches to the animal tales of *Siyali Tamuli* (Officer Fox), Assam has a rich treasure trove of folklore. Lakshminath Bezbaroa was the first writer to compile orally transmitted tales, whose works shall be considered for the purpose of this chapter. Apart from Bezbaroa, Troloikyeswari Devi's Baruani's compilation of folktales will be examined in this chapter. As we have already seen from the above paragraph, the tales of these writers also abound with 'ableist ideology'. Some of their tales such as *Ou Kunwori*, *Kukuri Kona*, *Chawalpuria*, and *Bandori* are taken up for detailed study for this section.

While examining the portrayals of disability in the fairy tales of Brother Grimms, Ann Schmiesing in her book *Disability, Deformity, and Disease in the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (2014) observes that "narratives not only often use physical ability or beauty to accentuate a character's moral virtue or other positive traits but also employ physical impairment as a mark that signifies evildoers or further ostracizes the marginalized" (3). Although Schmiesing analysis of disability from a narratological perspective is confined to the cultural context of Germany, a closer examination reveals that disability is often used as a narrative technique to highlight ableism in folktales across the world. This dependence of the narrative on disability is theorized by David T Mitchell and Sharon L Snyder as "narrative prosthesis"—a concept "meant to indicate that disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight" ("Narrative Prosthesis" 224). Viewed in the context of the narrative prosthesis, most of the tales from Bezbaroa and Baruani are prosthetic as they depend on disability to advance the plot. "Ou kunwori" from Lakshminath Bezbaroa's compilation of folktales *Burhi Aair Sadhu* is one such tale, where the narrative prosthesis is deployed to exemplify the physical difference of the protagonist. As the tale opens, the readers are told how one of the queens of a certain kingdom gave birth to a baby boy, and the younger queen gave birth to an elephant

apple. The plot advances to narrate how the *Ou Kunwori* or the elephant-apple maiden is treated as a pariah soon after her birth because of her physically anomalous birth. This physically anomalous birth of the *Ou kunwori* becomes the 'unnatural deviance' which sets forth the story. In this regard, the tale's undue reliance on a disabled aspect makes the story 'prosthetic'. As the elder queen in the story of *Ou kunwori* gives birth to a baby boy, the younger queen is put to further shame for giving birth to an Ou-tanga (Elephant-apple). The birth of the baby boy which is considered 'normal' by society accentuates the marked 'deviance/abnormality' of the *Ou kunwori*. In fact, the younger queen was so upset and disgusted with her birth/baby that she immediately dumped her into the rubbish dump. We have already seen from Goffman's discussion how 'normals' do not consider the person they stigmatize even as humans. In this regard, the mother's act of disavowing her child results from her adherence to, what Goffman identifies as, 'stigma-theory'. The dehumanization of *Ou Kunwori* is justified on the ground that her 'not quite human' form does not adhere to the 'normative' structure of society. As already stated, *Ou Kunwori* is therefore a grotesque figure whose vegetable attributes makes her a deviant. Drawing on Max Luthi and Vladimir Propp, Hans-Jorg Uther agrees that one of the basic functions of the folktale is to obliterate a deficiency through 'magical cure' or restoration. (*The Greenwood Encyclopedia* 269). Similarly, Mitchell and Synder also argue that "narrative issues to resolve or correct a deviance marked as improper to a social context" ("Narrative Prosthesis" 227). This act of fixing the deviance "may involve an obliteration of the difference through a cure, the rescue of the despised object from social censure, the extermination of the deviant as a purification of the social body, or the revaluation of an alternative mode of being" (227). In the context of the story of *Ou Kunwori*, the titular protagonist's anomalous bodily form also needs to be obliterated through some 'magical cure'. Therefore, the second part of the story revolves around the prince, who on noticing the princess slipping out of the elephant-apple fruit was desperate to marry her. The prince was, in fact, so

adamant and desperate to marry her that he stopped eating, and he forced his father to send a marriage proposal to the father of the elephant-apple. However, the story does not end simply with the marriage of the elephant-apple and the prince. Even after his marriage, the prince was very unhappy about not being able to see the beautiful princess, whom he was able accidentally, to see only once. However, like most fairy tales, the story ends on a happy note where the prince is finally successful in restoring the ideal human form of the elephant-apple princess. The introduction of the able-bodied prince is indeed necessary from a narratological perspective to eliminate the 'supposed disability' of the *Ou Kunwori*. Ann Schmiesing rightly asserts that "within the ideal realm of the fairy tale able-bodiedness becomes the norm" (*Disability, Disease and deformity* 5). In the context of *Ou Kunwori's* story, the marriage of the prince and the elephant-apple could not be an ideal one, unless the princess is transformed into an able-bodied self, to become compatible with the fully able prince. The very act of the protagonist's (*Ou-Kunwori's*) 'magical restoration' to an ideal physical form in itself is an enforcement of normalcy.

The story of *Kukurikona* (night-blind) from Bezbaroa's *Burhi Aair Sadhu* also echoes similar sentiments of stigma attached to disability. Similar to the plot of "Ou Kunwori", the narrative of "Kukurikona" is prosthetic, so far, the action of the story revolves around the disabled aspect (night-blindness) of the unnamed protagonist. However, unlike the sad tone of *Ou Kunwori's* story, the disability or defect of the son-in-law (Kukurikona) sets a humorous tone in the story. Hans-Jorg Uther tells how "the defects of the disabled have a comic effect because they violate the conventions of harmonious proportions. Therefore, these defects are an ideal starting point for plots intended to create a humorous mood" (*The Greenwood Encyclopedia* 270). In the story of "Kukurikona" the unnamed son-in-law suffers from an ailment known as night-blindness. However, he guards it so secretly that even his in-laws do not have any suspicion of it. As the plot unfolds, the readers are presented with a series of

humorous events leading to the discovery of the son-in-law's night-blindness. As Baruah narrates:

> The son-in-law had borrowed a cow from his father-in-law to till his field. One day the father-in-law asked him to return the cow. Unfortunately, that day the cow was late in returning from the field. By the time it arrived, darkness had already set in. The son-in-law was now in a quandary. How to guide the cow in darkness was his problem. After much thought, he decided to hold on to the cow's tail. ... As planned, he pointed the cow towards his father-in-law's house, and with the cow leading the way soon they reached their destination (*Old Mother's Wise Tales* 171).

However, the real struggle of the son-in-law begins after reaching his in-laws house, where the thought of having been discovered makes him do various absurd things which in turn evoke laughter and humor. For instance, when the mother-in-law comes to serve him food for the second time, he hits her head with a wooden log taking her to be a cat. Likewise, as the son-in-law hides in the fern grove to avoid a further obstacle on that particular night, the mother-in-law happens to throw the entire garbage heap upon him. Consequently, the mother-in-law discovers for the first time that her son-in-law is inflicted with night-blindness. As is seen from the story, the primary aim of the narrative is to evoke humour and fun. However, what cannot be overlooked in the story is the social stigma attached to disability such as night-blindness. The primary reason for the son-in-law's concealment of his 'impairment' emanates from the societal constructions of stigma. One interesting point about the story is that it is the son-in-law who is inflicted with night-blindness and not the son. Therefore, being a son-in-law, he is probably apprehensive about his marital life as well. Being aware of the social stigma, the son-in-law strives hard to conceal his 'impairment' against all odds. However, towards the end of the story, his pain is revealed when he utters, "O rain god please bless the one who is night-blind. The obstacles that I have surmounted by today are enough. Please do not send more of

them my way" (174). The son-in-law's confession of his enduring pain (in direct speech) illustrates the lived reality of visual impairment. Although the disabled aspect of the son-in-law makes him an object of mockery in the story, the lived experience of the trauma of disabled people cannot be overlooked.

The story of "Chawalpuria" from Troloikyeswari Devi Baruani's compilation of folktales *Sadhu Katha*, opens with a father demanding his six children to declare on whose mercy had the children been sustaining till that day. And on whose mercy would they be living in the future? The five sons, in their attempt to flatter the father, immediately attribute their sustenance to their father. But the girl replies with great candour that her father is undoubtedly supporting her since birth, but once she is given for marriage, she would live on her own. The outraged father immediately gives her hand to an obese man as a mark of punishment for her supposed 'arrogance'.

The story of "Chawalpuria" manifests a different narrative pattern, where the virtuous and/or positive trait of the protagonist is tested by placing her against a disabled character. The latter part of the story focuses on how the wife (the girl in the story) manages efficiently to efface the disability of her obese husband, which shall be examined in the last section of this chapter. However, at this point, it is significant to focus more on the figure of *Chawalpuria* himself whose obesity (disability) has relegated him to the fringes of society. As it is seen from the above description, the father decides to punish his daughter by giving her in marriage to a person who is not only poor but who also suffers from an ailment now known as obesity. *Chawalpuria*, as he is commonly called, is a woodcutter at the king's palace. He eats one *pura* (almost equivalent to 20kg) rice at every meal. As Troloikyeswari Devi narrates:

> In a certain country there lived a wood-cutter who used to gather dry wood for the king. However, in exchange for his service, he did not demand any money from the king, but

> his contract with the royal palace was to provide him with the necessary ingredients such as rice, lentils, spinach, salt, and oil for his two meals. For this unusual eating habit, he was known in the kingdom as *Chawalpuria*. Because of excessive consumption of rice, he started growing horizontally (round-shaped) which made him look very short-statured and ugly in physical appearance (*Sadhu katha* 21).

The father in retaliation to the daughter's seemingly arrogant reply wants to see her married to a person who would be unable to support her, even with the basic necessity of food. He could have hardly found a better match than *Chawalpuria*, who honestly confesses that whatever he receives from the king just suffices his belly, and he is in no position to share his one *pura* meal with her. The father's decision to inflict punishment on his otherwise wise and beautiful (able-bodied) daughter by marrying her to an obese (disabled) person highlights the societal perceptions of what is now understood as disability/serious illness. The portrayal of *Chawalpuria* as someone unwilling to share his meal with his wife reiterates stereotypes about the 'gluttony' of obese people. The story of "Chawalpuria" also highlights how obesity leads to other kinds of disability in an individual, often making the disabled an object of scorn and contempt. For instance, the wife tells *Chawalpuria* how people run away from him because of his demonic appearance, and how his unusual eating habit makes him an object of ridicule and fun in society. The people's act of running away from *Chawalpuria* can be related to what Ato Quayson has referred to as "aesthetic nervousness". As Quayson states, "the primary level in which it (aesthetic nervousness) may be discerned is in the interaction between a disabled and non-disabled character, where a variety of tensions may be identified" ("Aesthetic Nervousness" 202). Rosemarie Garland Thomson also elaborates how a first-time social encounter between the disabled and non-disabled evokes certain kind of nervousness. To put it in her words, "when one person has a visible disability, however, it almost always dominates and skews the normate's process of sorting out perceptions and forming reactions. The

interaction is usually strained because the nondisabled person may feel fear, pity, fascination, repulsion, or merely surprise, none of which is expressible according to social protocol" (qtd. in Quayson 203). In the context of "Chawalpuria" the nervousness or fear on the part of the non-disabled characters emanate from their encounter with the protagonist because the corporeal otherness of *Chawalpuria* makes him a grotesque figure who does not fit into the normative structure of the society. Viewed from a disability-studies approach, *Chawalpuria*'s story emphasizes the fact that although obesity as an 'ailment' is not a disabling aspect, it paves the path for an assortment of 'corporeal differences'.

Troloikyeswari Devi's "Bandori" from her collection of folktales *Sadhu katha* is the story of a beautiful damsel from heaven who disguises herself as an ugly female monkey. The story is particularly significant as it reflects the idea of ugliness as a disability. Ugliness, as Max Luthi states 'is a moving force in the plot' of most of the fairy tales (*The Fairy Tale As An Art Form 34*). The story of *Bandori* also begins with a king marrying an ugly female monkey because of the 'royal word' he has given to his minister. As Sanjeev Kumar Nath recounts:

> It is the story of a prince who had a female monkey for a wife. The seven sons of a king had shot arrows- according to the minister's advice- and wherever each arrow fell, they found a girl for marrying. The princes had given their word that they would not disobey the minister in this matter and would marry the girl on whose house the arrow fell. The arrows of all the princes except the youngest prince had fallen on the houses of people whose daughters were indeed suitable brides for princes. The arrow shot by the youngest prince, however, was picked up by a female monkey, and according to the word given to the minister, the young prince married the female monkey (The *World of Assamese Folktales* 144-145).

What is striking is the fact that soon after the arrow falls on the female monkey, everybody including the minister tries to dissuade the prince from marrying the female monkey. The tale is exceptional in the sense that the prince remains steadfast in his devotion to his monkey wife, even as the societal obsession with physical appearance is the focus of the story. The people around the prince devise various plans and means to separate the monkey wife from the 'beautiful prince'. From a narratological perspective, the ugliness of *Bandori* serves as a foil to 'normative standards of beauty". As Max Luthi observes, "in the fairy tale it is primarily figures with human form that receive the designation beautiful" (*The Fairytale* 1). Drawing on Luthi's insight it can be argued that if human figures are attributed with traits of 'beauty', any form of anomalous figures would be automatically deemed as ugly. In the world of animals, *Bandori's* appearance is the normative standard and it would probably not cause any anxiety to the animals. However, the physical appearance of *Bandori* is problematic particularly to the human world, as it does not fit into what society perceives as 'beautiful'. From the point of the narrative prosthesis, therefore, the 'unsightly' has to be removed from view; the deviance needs to be cured through some supernatural elements. To find acceptance among the humans *Bandori* too must metamorphose into an 'other worldly' being, which is either equal to, or superior to the human world. Therefore, the transformation of *Bandori* into a divine damsel from paradise (cosmic world) obliterates her ugliness and gives her room among the able-bodied humans. In her new bodily form of a damsel, *Bandori* is not only envied but also becomes an object of desire by society. From a disability studies vantage, the story of "Bandori" therefore, examines how the societal perception of normative standards of beauty can often create, what Synder and Brueggeman's term as "psychological disabilities".

Breaking the 'Norms': Challenging Disability through Representations

In his entry on "Disability" in *The Greenwood Encyclopaedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* Hans–Jorg Uther asserts that the depiction of characters or animals with physical defects in the

folktales does not always have a negative connotation. "In fact, deformities can be the reason for the remarkable abilities of the disabled. Accordingly, disability is not detrimental to these figures but makes them superior to their normal counterparts" (268). Keeping Uther's opinion in view, it is seen that some of the tales from Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Troloikyeswari Devi Baruani's collection also attempt to challenge and subvert social constructions of disability. Equivalent to the Thumbling tale of Brothers' Grimm, the tale of *Ebegotia*, from Troloikyeswari Devi's compilation of folktales *Sandhiyar Sadhu*, depicts a dwarf protagonist who outwits many able-bodied persons including the king. A childless mother who desperately longed for a child was finally blessed with a tiny boy, who, despite much care, could not grow more than a span in height. While the father immediately asks the mother to throw the child away owing to his diminutive size, the mother brings him up with much care and love. He is called *Ebegotia* by everyone for his being about a span in height. What is striking in the story is *Ebegotia*'s extreme tininess is not a limiting factor for him; instead, he takes advantage of his diminutive size and is able to attain monetary gain and position in society. The fact is projected through various adventures which *Ebegotia* undertakes right from the beginning of the story. At one instance, as *Ebegotia* is returning home from his maternal uncle's house, holding a cow's tail, he happens to submerge in cow dung. Coincidentally, at that very moment, two pedestrians slip into the cow dung and stumble upon *Ebegotia*. The tiny *Ebegotia*, who is immersed in the cow dung, is finally exposed as a grotesque demonic figure. However, instead of incurring embarrassment and stigma from the wanderer for his corporeal otherness, *Ebegotia* uses his quick-witted repartee and demands monetary recompense from the wanderers as a compensation for breaking his long–term meditation. As the plot unfolds, the readers are presented with a series of adventures, where despite the perils resulting from *Ebegotia*'s short-statured body, he manages to use his wit and shrewdness to outwit his adversaries. Fortune smiles upon *Ebegotia* to such an extent that even the king is envious of his success. Out of

jealousy, the king leaves no stone unturned to destroy *Ebegotia* through various means such as killing *Ebegotia*'s horse, burning his house, and throwing him into the sea. However, every time the king devises a plan to harm *Ebegotia*, this diminutive character not only manages to recover himself but also makes sure that the king falls prey to the same snare, which had been designed for him. One interesting point to be noted in this regard is that in contrast to *Ebegotia*'s diligence and cleverness, the king is depicted as a foolish and cruel ruler. However, so far as the functions of the fairy tale are concerned, a king is supposed to be of the highest worth. As Max Luthi argues,

> Princes and kings are appropriate to the fairy tale not only because they are figures of the extreme and can easily function as representatives of the beautiful, but also because they are in accord with the Universalist tendency of the fairy tale. The king can ban all the spindles from his realm, but the knight only from his castle. The king is representative of the whole (*The Fairy tale as an Art Form* 157).

The idea of 'wholeness' also implies 'able-bodiedness' from the vantage point of critical disability studies. In this regard, the portrayal of the monarch as foolish and incapable in "Ebegotia" stands in contrast to the idea of what Ann Schmiesing terms as "organic wholeness". In other words, the king by not conforming to the normative notions of 'able-bodiedness', becomes the 'abnormal', 'the other', or 'the disabled'. On the other hand, by emerging victorious in an environment/ a society, where people are far taller than him, *Ebegotia* proves that he is 'extraordinarily abled'. Keeping in view the role reversal of the characters, it can be argued that the tale of "Ebegotia" attempts to subvert and challenge the assumed notions of 'able-bodiedness'.

Cognitive impairment or intellectual disability, as it is known today, is an area that has often been overlooked in disability studies scholarship. However, the figures of the simpleton or

blockhead, or dummy prevail in folktales across the world. In the introduction to KHM2, the Brother's Grimms assert that "the Dummy is inept in all things that require wit, and he is therefore ridiculed and made to engage in lowly labor. The Dummy can prevail despite others' unkind treatment of him because of his possession of other attributes that supersede worldly wit" (qtd. in Ann Schimising 162). "Ramdhan" from Troloikyeswari Devi Baruani's *Sandhiyar Sadhu* is one such tale where the protagonist is ridiculed and marginalized by society because of his supposed intellectual impairment. Interestingly, the 'allegedly stupid' character of Devi Baruani seems to be above average in intelligence, since he not only withstands social marginalization but also punishes everyone who ridicules him. As the tale opens, *Ramdhan*, the titular protagonist, is depicted as a spoilt child who could hardly learn the first two alphabets of Assamese in the first four years of his life. Consequently, he is teased and ridiculed by everyone for his dullness. At times when *Ramdhan* is extremely enraged with the insulters, he takes recourse to violent means such as throwing a girl into the pond, burning someone's hut, and cutting a groom's head off. Now, the question to be addressed is what causes Ramdhan to react violently to those who ridicule him? Is it his low intelligence or cognitive impairment? Or is it because of naivety that gets him involved even in murderous activities? In order to analyze these queries, firstly, it is necessary to shed light on the three events, for which Ramdhan was acquitted in the court of the king. In the first instance, a merchant forcefully lures Ramdhan to carry a pot of *ghee* on his shoulder from the market. As Ramdhan carries the pot and simultaneously daydreams, he happens to break the *matka* (pot) of *ghee*. The furious merchant demands money from Ramdhan as compensation for breaking the pot, and when Ramdhan refuses him money, the merchant takes him to the King for justice. In the second instance, while Ramdhan is being taken to the court he meets an old couple on the way, who further incite the angry Ramdhan with a question: "Ramdhan, we have heard a lot about your erudition, so please tell us how was Ravan killed? And how was Lanka burnt into ashes?" As

the question is posed to Ramdhan, he takes the axe from the old man's hand, and without further delay chops his head off and demonstrates to the old lady the way Ravan was killed. He goes on to burn the old lady's house, demonstrating to her that Lanka was also burnt similarly. The old woman would not know how to react to the sudden incident, and subsequently, she also joins the merchant in filing a case against Ramdhan. In the third instance, as Ramdhan heads towards the court accompanied by his petitioners, they witness a marriage procession taking place, where the groom who is seated on the elephant is unable to enter the gate. Seeing Ramdhan approaching the procession some of the groom's relatives remark, "Here comes our *Pandit* Ramdhan! Who can give a better solution than erudite Ramdhan" (*Sandhiyar Sadhu* 16). Subsequently, the people pull Ramdhan and place him on the elephant seeking a solution. Without any hesitation, Ramdhan takes the axe from the *mahout* and cuts the groom's head in an instant, and says that the groom can now enter the gate as his height corresponds to the height of the gate. The bereft father of the groom is shocked at the event, and later he also joins the other two angry petitioners who want to punish Ramdhan. Interestingly the story ends on a positive note. The king examines each case separately and declares Ramdhan to be 'innocent'. The King's judgment, as it is seen from the narrative, is based on the logic that a supposedly stupid person is deemed to react naively. According to the King, in each of the above cases, Ramdhan offers a solution to the questions he is being asked, through demonstrations. Therefore, the fault lies solely with the people who ridiculed Ramdhan and not with the 'allegedly stupid' protagonist. Although the king pronounces Ramdhan stupid and pardons him on the pretext of what we today understand as cognitive impairment, it is difficult to conclude whether the protagonist is actually of low intelligence or has above average ability. The justification provided by Ramdhan for killing people in each of the cases seems to be logical not only to the king but also to the readers. However, while the king deems him a stupid or naive person, the narrative opens the scope for the readers to consider the subversive potential

of the tale. Ramdhan, by making use of his *disability* to punish his stigmatizers, ostensibly shows how a supposed disability can be used as a potential measure for subverting notions of 'normalcy'.

"Kona aru Kuja" (The blind and the hunch-back) is another tale, similar in its theme from Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Koka Deuta aru Nati Lora* (Grandfather and Grandson) in which the disabled *Kona* and *Kuja* are portrayed as powerful protagonists who triumph despite the social stigma of their disability. Just like the tale of "*Kukurikona*" the primary aim of the tale is to evoke laughter through its farcical storyline. However, the tale is significant for its moral undertones. As seen from the conversation between the grandfather and the grandchild, the story imparts the teaching that great things can be achieved through cooperation not only by normal people but even disabled persons like Kona (blind) and Kuja (hunchback) can achieve spectacular success through mutual co-operation. The narrator, by emphasizing the words "not only *we*, but even *they*", undoubtedly marks a clear distinction between the *normal* and the *disabled*. However, despite the lack or impairment of the disabled protagonist, the characters are presented with extraordinary wit that helps them to outwit even the most powerful demon. The dialogue between the blind man and the hunchback man is particularly interesting at the beginning of the tale. As the blind man proposes the idea of setting on a journey to earn success, the hunchback man reminds him that their corporeal otherness will always be an obstacle for them. However, the blind man's reply is strikingly important as he tells that, "all we need is a pair of eyes and a pair of legs, you carry me in your back and I will guide you throughout the journey. Apart from that, I have wit and intelligence" (*Koka Deuta* 67). Although the reply of the blind man seems humorous, it seems to critique the societal assumptions of normalcy. Each of the protagonists complements what the other 'lack', and in the process, they could achieve what any able-bodied protagonist can achieve. Their act of defying the demon and amassing a huge amount of wealth draws attention to the fact that no bodily impairment can be an obstacle

as long as one is not influenced and confined by the social stigma of disability. In this regard, the tale, though simple, has huge subversive undertones.

Gender and Disability

All disabled people suffer from the social and cultural stigma of 'corporeal otherness'. However, disabled women's experience of marginalization and discrimination seems more intense than their male counterparts. Lina Abu Habib states how disabled women are doubly marginalized on the grounds of both disability and sex. As she puts it, "in addition to suffering discrimination on grounds of their disability, disabled women are subjected to the all-too-common forms of discrimination on the grounds of sex that women, in general, suffer from in almost every given context. This double discrimination means that women's experience is profoundly different from those of disabled men" ("Women and disability" 50). The hegemony of both patriarchy and ableism affects women's lived experience of disability. However, the women's movement or feminism itself has failed to understand the concerns of disabled women. Considering this gap in feminist scholarship critics like Rosmarie Garland-Thomson, Simi Linton, and many others have come up with what they term 'feminist disability studies'. Among the vast critical cultural works that feminist disability studies do, it also "shows that disability—similar to race and gender—is a system of representation that marks bodies as subordinate, rather than an essential property of bodies that supposedly have something wrong with them" (Garland-Thomson 1558). Garland further opines that the stereotypical and unexamined narratives result in virulent bias against disabled women far more than women in general. As Garland recounts, "women with disabilities, even more intensely than women in general, have been cast in the collective cultural imagination as inferior, lacking, excessive, incapable, unfit and useless" ("Feminist Disability Studies" 1567). Keeping Rosmarie Garland's statement in view, it can be argued that the women characters, as depicted in the works of the concerned writers, lack agency. However, when it comes to the male characters,

they often come out as triumphant underdogs towards the end of the tale. As seen from the previous sections, the allegedly disabled characters such as *Kona* and *Kuja*, *Ebegotia*, and Ramdhan emerge as victorious protagonists despite the social stigma of their disability. However, when it comes to the female disabled characters, they are often portrayed as dependent on the mercy of either men or gods. For instance, in the story "OuKunwori", the physically anomalous birth of *Ou Kunwori* is magically erased by the prince who falls in love with her divine form. The voice of the *Ou Kunwori* is not heard in the story even a single time. Her story is mediated through the voice of the narrator or the prince or other marginalized characters in the story. According to Hans-Jorg Uther, "a permanent or temporary physical disability may be inflicted on humans in the form of miraculous punishments" ("Disability" 269). This motif of 'magic disability' is evident in tales such as "Tula aru Teja" from Lakshminath Bezbaroa's compilation of folktales *Burhi Aair Sadhu*. In the story, the 'evil-hearted' step-mother temporarily disables the female protagonist, Teja, by transforming her into a bird. Although apparently, the tale does not seem to be a tale of disability, it speaks at large about the reality of mobility-related impairments. After the evil stepmother transforms Teja from a human form into a bird, (to substitute Teja's royal position of a queen with that of her daughter Tula), she experiences her restricted body as disabled in an environment engineered for humans. However, this kind of mobility-related impairment resulting from the transformation of a human being into an inanimate object or an animal or a bird is also cured through a male agency. For instance, even in the tale of "Tula aru Teja", the evil spell of the stepmother is finally broken, and her temporary disability is eventually cured by Teja's husband, who otherwise has a very minimal role in the story. According to Hans-Jorg Uther, the motif of disabling someone is also taken as a precautionary measure in most of the folktales to eliminate rivals or to "secure someone's possessions and power before anybody could lay hold of them" (269). Analyzing Bezbaroa's tale of "Tejimola" from a disability studies

perspective, it can be argued that *Tejimola's* murder by her stepmother, and her subsequent mobility-related impairment and disability result from the stepmother's desire to eliminate her. *Tejimola*'s resurrection into a creeper, a tree, a lotus flower, and finally into a bird is essentially disabling as it prevents her from operating fully in the human sphere. However, as in the tale of *Teja*, it is seen that *Tejimola*'s human form is subsequently given back to her by her father towards the end of the tale. Thus, in both the tales of Bezbaroa, the disability of the female protagonists is magically cured or erased by the male characters. In the context of metamorphosis, Lutz Rohrich makes an important observation in his *Folktales and Reality* (1991), which is worth citing in this regard. According to Rohrich, "only evil supernatural characters have the power to metamorphose themselves or others". (qtd. in Ann Schmiesing 99). Strikingly, in the tales examined above, the evil power to metamorphose or enchant someone is endowed to the female characters (like witches), and the power to restore the enchanted characters to normalcy (disenchantment) is attributed to the male characters. Both Teja and *Tejimola*'s stepmothers are portrayed as possessing evil powers through which they can restrict the humanly-endowed mobility of the protagonists. In contrast to the stepmothers, the male characters such as Teja's husband or/and *Tejimola*'s father are portrayed as having some kind of healing power through which they can erase the ailment or disability of the female protagonists. This association of the female with the 'evil' and the male with the 'virtuous' is a recurrent motif in most of the folktales across the globe, and Assamese folktales are no exception in this regard.

'Representations' and Lived Experience of Disability

It is striking to note that while gendered patterns exist in most of the fairy and folk tales of Assam, in a few exceptional tales of Troloikyeswari Devi Baruani female protagonists find an expressive agency, particularly with regard to disability. Baruani's engagement with disability in her collection of folktales, to a large extent, was influenced by her lived experience of illness

and disability. In the Introduction to her first compilation of folktales *Sadhu katha*, Baruani addresses her readers by talking about her illness. Baruani states, “because of my chronic illness, I cannot devote myself completely to any worldly affairs. Therefore, in the cold wintry days, I spend my time, narrating stories to children” (*Sadhu Katha* iv). Likewise, Radhikamohan Bhagawati, Jnanadibhiram Barooah and Lakshminath Bezbaroa also mention Baruani’s illness in their respective Forewords to Baruani’s collection of folktales.

While all the above-mentioned writers make some passing remarks about Baruani’s illness, Sanjeev Kumar Nath details her illness in his book *The World of Assamese Folktales*. Nath narrates how Baruani was warned against childbirth because of her chronic diabetic condition. As Nath states, “insulin had not yet been discovered, and this was the regular precautionary advice given by doctors to their diabetic women patients in those days. The fact that she was warned against childbirth must have caused her some distress" (5). In light of the above remarks, a very pertinent question can be addressed at this point: Is the 'supposed distress' of Baruani alleviated to some extent by her act of story-telling? In other words, does storytelling serve as a therapeutic means for Baruani to heal her lived experience of disability? In that case, how does Baruani deploy narratives to reflect upon her own experience of illness? To answer the above queries, it is necessary to focus on the tales through close reading.

In the “Introduction” to her first collection of folktales, *Sadhu katha,* Troloikyeswari Devi narrates the way she has relied on her memory to a larger extent to rewrite the tales she heard as a child. Additionally, she candidly confesses that at times she has made necessary amendments and alterations to the tales, whenever her memory did not support her. From an editorial sense, Baruani’s act of addition or amendments of the tales can be regarded as what Ann Schimiesing has termed ‘editorial prosthesis’. Examining the Grimms act of amending certain tales from the Kinder-und Haus Marchenfrom a disability-related perspective, Ann Schiemising defines editorial prosthesis as, “whereas narrative prosthesis refers to a narrative’s

reliance on disability, what I call 'editorial prosthesis' is narrative prosthesis introduced, augmented, or commented on by the Grimms" (*Disability, Disease and Deformity* 3). To put it simply, the editorial prosthesis is the act of editing tales not only in the general sense but also with regard to the disability-related changes the author makes to the individual tales. Now, extending Schmiesing's notion of 'editorial prosthesis' to the cultural context of Baruani's tales, it can be argued that the editorial prophesizing is affected by Baruani's own lived experience of disability. Likewise, it can also be argued that Baruani's necessary additions or deletions to the tales give voice to the otherwise disabled female characters. For instance, in the tale of *Chawalpuria*, it is seen how an obese man's supposed disability is finally erased by his wife's wisdom. This tale of "Chawalpuria" stands in contrast to many tales examined above, where a person's disability is finally erased through a male agency. Why is Baruani's female protagonist, then, depicted as a wise woman who could cure the disability of her obese husband? Does it have any affinity with Baruani's lived experience of disability? Just like the wise wife of *Chawalpuria*, Barauni herself was a very wise and sensible woman. Sanjeev Kumar Nath, through one of his visits to Baruani's ancestral house, tells his readers how Baruani "was meticulous in all work of the household, and was an expert in all the skills that were expected of a lady in her situation" (The World of Assamese Folktales 5). Like her narrative counterpart, (*Chawalpuria*'s wife) Baruani was also an expert at weaving, cooking, gardening, etc. The close analogy between Baruani and her female protagonist in the story ostensibly points to the fact that the lived experience of the author directly impacts the editing process of the tale. Likewise, it can also be argued that the author could come to terms with her disability-related anxiety by giving voice to the female protagonist through the editorial prosthesis. Similarly, "Bandori" is another exceptional tale from Baruani's *Sadhu katha*, where the female agency finds expression due to the editorial prosthecizing of the tale. Unlike, most fairy tales where a female protagonist's morality is tested by the male character, *Bandori* depicts

a reversal order where the prince's conjugal constancy is being tested by a damsel in disguise. The ugliness of *Bandori* which is a disabling aspect of the tale is used as a powerful device by the female protagonist to test her husband's devotion and steadfastness towards her. In this regard, the tale deviates from the regular motif of beauty tales because normally it is the *beautiful* woman who is made to live with *ugly beasts* and *frog kings* to prove her resoluteness towards her love. Contrary to the ethos of the times, where polygamy was a regular practice, Baruani, through her editorial prosthecizing of the tale, give assertive expression to the otherwise subjugated female voice.

Conclusion

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson posits that "social justice gets stigmatized in part, through patterns of representation that import subordinate status, which perpetuates disrespect learned via stereotypes" ("Picturing People with Disabilities" 37). If 'representations' indeed have the power to shape disabling attitudes through the perpetuation of certain stereotypes, then it is imperative to decode the 'power structures' operative in a text. In this regard, the various tales examined in this chapter also interrogate the ableist prejudices embedded in the texts. While most of the tales re-inscribe ableism by treating disability as an inferior category based on 'corporeal otherness', certain exceptional characters such as *Ebegotia, Ramdhan, Bandori,* and a few others subvert the social constructions of disability by overcoming disability. Whether the tales subscribe to the normative standards of society or they subvert such normative expectations, the 'representations' underscore the fact that disabled characters cannot escape the social stigma of 'corporeal otherness'. This 'corporeal essentialism' in real life, as it is seen from Garland's understanding "is more complex and more dynamic than representations usually suggest" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 12). This view is also reiterated by Pothier and Delvin who argue that "issues of disability are not just questions of impairment, functional limitations, or enfeeblement; they are issues of social values, institutional priorities, and political will. They

are questions of power: of who and what gets valued, and who and what gets marginalized" ("Introduction: Towards a Critical Theory" 9). The various insights offered by Pothier and Delvin and Garland-Thomson highlight the intense relationship between the lived reality of disability and representations. It ostensibly points to the fact that the ableist stereotype gets codified and reinforced through representations, which in due course of time shapes cultural attitudes to bodily responses. Considering the pervasive potentiality of 'representations' to materialize social patterns of bodily bias and exclusions, it would be inadequate to analyze the folktales primarily meant for children merely for their figurative or symbolic significance. In this regard, the present chapter by focusing on the plots, narratives, themes, and characters of the tales attempts to offer a new lens to look at disability aesthetics.

NOTES

[1.] KHM is the abbreviation for "Kinder- und Hausmärchen" (Children's and Household Tales). It was compiled and first published by the Brothers Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in 1812. The second volume appeared in 1814, and, by the seventh edition, published in 1857, the number of tales in the collection had expanded to 200.

[2.] The Karbis are mentioned as the *Mikirs*in the Constitution Order, Govt. of India. The Karbi tribe mostly reside in the Karbi Anglong District of Assam, India.

[3.] The Mishing tribes of Assam are also known as the *Miri* by the local people. The Mishing tribes are dispersed mostly in Lakhimpur, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, and Dhemaji districts of the Indian state of Assam.

[4]*Teton* is the Assamese word for trickster, literally meaning 'the clever one'.

[5] *Ghee* or clarified butter is a common fat used in Indian cookery.

[6] In Assamese language a *mahout* is referred to a person who rides, and tends an elephant.

Chapter IV

Animality in Children's Literature from Assam

The presence of talking animals in stories dates back to the oral traditions when humans and animals co-existed in a shared space. Wily jackals, clever cats, adventurous pigs, loyal monkeys, and the like abound in folklore stories. Animals have always had an important role to play in children's literature. As Markowsky observes, "primitive story-tellers used animals as antagonists to dramatize man's ceaseless struggle against the forces of nature. Animals were also used in didactic stories such as the fables of Aesop, and had roles in medieval literatures as 'questioning beasts and dreamland dragons'" ("Why Anthropomorphism" 460). When it comes to literature, meant especially for children, animal figures are all-pervasive. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein notes that "on average, at least two-thirds of the books (in children's bookstore) are in some form or another linked with nature and the environment, and—specifically and most importantly—with animals" (qtd. in *Talking Animals in Children's* 7). The animal stories, however, are always expected to serve as a blueprint on moral and social conduct. Most of the animal stories are supposed to be, to put in the words of Margaret Blount, "improving in some way, pointing oblique and therefore palatable morals" (*Animal Land*: *The Creatures of Children's Fiction* 16). The exhortation to "improve" continues to occur in most of the animal tales; the status of animals might have changed from primitive talking animals to accultured modern animals, but the animals in children's literature are often considered as objects of socio-cultural literacy. However, what has often been overlooked in most of the readings of animal representation is that, although animals are frequently deployed as figurative tropes to comment on human conditions, literary animals also hold the potential to subvert the long-established human-animal binaries. Keeping this aspect in view, the present chapter attempts to focus on human's relationship with animals in children's literature from Assam.

While exploring the inter-species relationships, this chapter proposes a few questions pertinent to the topic. These questions are as follows: what roles do animals play in children's literature in Assam? Is anthropomorphism a means of attributing certain 'values' to children? If so, how? What are the other potential merits of anthropomorphism concerning children's literature? How does children's literature from Assam subvert or reinforce the species hierarchy, particularly in the wake of colonial modernity? The above questions will be addressed from a posthumanist and animality studies lens.

Section I of the present chapter, therefore, attempts to examine the role of animals in children's fantasy literature from Assam with special reference to Bezbaroa's works for children. It attempts to delineate how anthropomorphism is used in early children's literature in Assam in the colonial era to disseminate certain set of ideas to children in the wake of the new century. Section II of the chapter seeks to provide a theoretical framework of posthumanism and 'animality studies' about children's literature in general. Section III of the chapter attempts to see how children's fantasy literature such as Lakshminath Bezbaroa's "Ejoni Malini aru ejupa Phool" and Navakanta Baruah's *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur*, destabilize the species hierarchy between animals/nature and humans filtered into the region with the advent of colonial modernity. It also seeks to analyze how texts such as Atul Chandra Hazarika's *Nila Chorai* call attention to an interconnectedness framework at a time of massive ecological changes. The last section provides a brief conclusion to the chapter.

The Beginnings: Socializing through the voice of the animal

It has already been seen in the second chapter how the Assamese cultural nationalism of the nineteenth century paved the way for the formation of not only a distinct Assamese literature in general but also the emergence of a body of children's literature in particular. The new dawn of the twentieth century, therefore, demanded a new world order to espouse 'new principles

and new ideas of the modern world' (*Literature and Society* 170), especially to its children. The clarion call to educate the children of the soil was never so louder before. Intellectuals like Anandaram Dekhial Phukan emphasized the significance of modern education in various letters published in the magazine *Orunudoi*. Tillotoma Misra observes how Phukan "reiterates the view that the duty of the parents towards their children does not end with merely feeding and clothing them, but it must necessarily include their education as a primary requirement for the welfare of the children and of the country" (*Literature and Society 92).* Education, in this regard, however, had a much larger goal. Influenced by the Western ideals of liberal education and scientific temperament, Intellectuals like Anandaram Dekhial Phukan, Hem Chandra Barua, and Lakshminath Bezbaroa sought to disseminate the same to the children. Tillotoma Misra underscores the fact that the Assamese intellectuals like Bezbaroa and others maintained a 'moderate' and 'rational' approach towards Western culture. As Misra says:

> Stimulated by the new thoughts of the West, a group of intellectuals tried to view their own religion and culture from a rationale angle… The Assamese intellectuals of the nineteenth century were seldom unquestioning Anglophiles. Rather, they attempted to imbibe all that they considered to be good in the English culture and utilize them for the benefit of their own society. For example, Govinda Bezbaroa, a brother of Lakshminath Bezbaroa and one of the pioneering educationists of Assam, was reported to have confided to Benudhar Sarma that his primary aim had been to equip his young students with the English virtues of discipline, punctuality, unity, courage, and patriotism so that they could one day control the British (204-205).

The attempt of educationists like Govinda Bezbaroa and others to instill Western 'virtues' to children also marks the transition from devotional to secular trends in education. Education, therefore, was not confined only to the spiritual doctrine of virtue, but it encompassed an all-inclusive approach. However, even while considering Western ideals and virtues, the

educationists/writers have deployed certain strategies and techniques to make it all the more convincing and appealing. One of the tactics was the use of animal characters in the literature for the young. As Amy Ratelle persuasively argues in her book, *Animality and Children's Literature and Film,* that animals play a crucial role in the shaping of 'personal identity and 'social consciousness.' To put in her words, "literature written specially for middle-class children makes use of anthropomorphized animal characters ostensibly to impart middle class-class values to the young" (Ratelle 5). Although Ratelle's book is set against a different socio-cultural backdrop, her statement can be applicable to the cultural scenario of Assam. Emulating the premises set by Ratelle, the chapter attempts to trace how the animal characters in the works of Bezbaroa were primarily used as educational tools to instill certain 'values' to the children.

The imperative need to educate the children is prominent in Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Koka Deuta aru Nati Lora,* where the grandfather promises a story to the grandchild every day, only under the condition that the boy would conduct himself well. The conversations held between the grandfather and the grandchild before the beginning of each story is crucial because it serves as a guiding principle on social manners and etiquettes, particularly through a dialogic form. For instance, time and again the grandfather admonishes the child and refuses to narrate him a story for disobeying his elders. Bezbaroa, therefore, is one of the earliest writers to use anthropomorphism in his works meant for children. To put it simply, anthropomorphism is the act of assigning a human trait or characteristic to an animal or an object. Set in the fable tradition, like Aesop's fable and Panchatantra, Bezbaroa's *Junuka* makes use of talking animals primarily for voicing human concerns. As Margaret Blount examines in her book *Animal Land,* "a very old and rather different type of story based on animal folklore is the Beast Fable-the Animal Society theme where animals have taken the place of humans and act out human dramas… they have been regarded as the right books to give to children, recommended by educationists from Locke onwards" (26). Most of the fables in Bezbaroa's *Junuka* also attempt

to show the children how they ought to behave. In the fable of the *Teliasarang aru Fesu* (The Stork and the Owl), the *Teliasarang* who was chosen to be the King among the birds was specially invited to swear in as the king in a coronation ceremony to be held the following day. The *Teliasarang*, however, was so much overwhelmed with the news that he started behaving like a king from that very moment. On the actual day of the ceremony, when all the birds were waiting for the arrival of their new would-be-king– the stork, the *Teliasarang* was grooming himself. Vultures, kites, crows, cranes, ducks, sparrows, parrots all waited in vain, but the *Teliasarang* did not arrive before the auspicious moment. Looking at the gravity of the situation, the owl rose from his place in an instant, dipped into the sacred oil, and declared itself (himself) the king of the birds. Although, the other birds were astounded at the owl's behavior at first, gradually they praised the owl for its courage and accepted him as their king. The fable, then, has a very important message for the young; wisdom and industry win over lethargy, inactivity, and procrastination.

Another fable in the collection, *Rajhah aru Kauri* (The Swan and the Crow) talks about the consequence of befriending wicked company. Once, a swan happened to be perching on the branch of a tree, underneath which a hunter was peacefully having his afternoon slumber. A wicked crow who was also with the swan pooped on the hunter's face and flew away from the surrounding. On being awake, the hunter could only see the swan resting on the branch, and assumed that the swan had done the deed. Without delaying further, the hunter took his bow and arrow and killed the swan. This fable, therefore, serves as a cautionary tale to stay away from treacherous and wicked companies such as that of the crow. There are many similar fables in the collection *Junuka* which alert the readers to the treacherous and the deceitful, through the voice of the animals. The fable of *Tukura aru Sitol* (The weaver bird and the fish), *Bandor aru Siyal* (The fox and the monkey), *Burha aru Siyal* (The old man and the fox) convey a similar message; the naïve and the foolish are always betrayed by the cunning ones. The fables

described above, therefore, have a definite educative value for the young, at least in the context of twentieth-century modern Assam.

Posthumanism and 'The Animal Turn' in Children's Literature

One of the crucial 'boundary breakdowns', which Donna Haraway mentions in her significant manifesto, *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), is the borderline between humans and animals. As Haraway proposes, "by the late twentieth century in United States scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached (68)". Haraway's path-breaking *Manifesto* opens up new avenues to revisit humanity's relationships with non-human 'other' as it undercuts the long-established, 'absolutist' discourse of humanism. For a long time, the Biblical discourse of the 'origin myths' had legitimatized the human-animal divide. Citing William Henderson, Tom Tyler, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Animals and Literature* emphasizes how human exceptionalism had its roots in Biblical teachings. To put in Henderson's words:

> Biblical teaching is […] *anthropocentric*, so far as the world is concerned, the true centre of it being, not earth so much as man. The sun, physical centre of the system as he may be, shines for our sakes: the moon walks the night in our interest: the stars are there for our use. From the Biblical point of view, everything turns round the earth as the habitation of human *spirit* (17).

This anthropocentric world-view was further aggravated by the "enlightenment trajectory of humanist essentialism" (Huggan, Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* 151) which naturalizes man as the measure of all things. However, in the wake of the emerging body of scholarships on posthumanism and animal studies, the central position of man as an 'exceptional' being is often questioned. Posthumanism, as a philosophical stance, therefore, attempts to unseat the supreme

position of man. This view of Posthumanism is highlighted by Neil Badmington in his chapter on "posthumanism" in The *Routledge Companion to Literature and Science*:

> Posthumanism, by way of contrast, emerges from a recognition that "Man" is not the privileged and protected center, because humans are no longer – and perhaps never were – utterly distinct from animals, machines, and other forms of the "inhuman"; are the products of historical and cultural differences that invalidate any appeal to a universal, transhistorical human essence; are constituted as subjects by a linguistic system that pre-exists and transcends them; and are unable to direct the course of world history towards a uniquely human goal. In short, posthumanism arises from the theoretical and practical inadequacy– or even impossibility – of humanism (374).

Posthumanism, as a philosophical inquiry, thus, to put in the words of Hayles "evokes the exhilarating prospect of getting out of some of the old boxes and opening up new ways of thinking about what being human means" (*How We Became Posthuman* 285). However, Hayles also warns that such radical ways of thinking about humanity can be as much 'frightening as liberating' (285). Posthumanist discourse in this regard, can be broadly classified into two parts: transhumanism or 'an intensification of humanism' (*What is Posthumanism* xv) and critical posthumanism. Transhumanists, according to Pramod K Nayar, "believe in the perfectibility of the human, seeing the limitations of the human body as something that might be transcended through technology" (*Posthumanism* 4). Popular culture is replete with examples from the science-fiction genre where cyborgism and artificial intelligence are seamlessly entrenched into everyday lives. Thomas Philbeck draws a trajectory of science fiction movies with such transhumanist ideals. The 'posthumanist paradigm shift' has occurred, according to Philbeck, "from a cinematic fist-stage of 'desire and fear' of technologies, through the 1970s-1980s awe of 'technology's power on display', to the 2000's fifth stage 'belief in humans as enhancement-ready organism'. In the current sixth stage,

individuals will be dissolved into a great, possibly universe-sized amalgam" (*The Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism* 95). While the above strand of posthumanism is concerned with the 'techno-modifications' of the human, critical posthumanism attempts to examine human "as an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages and crossings with all forms of life" (*Posthumanism* 5).

One of the key formulations of critical posthumanism is destabilizing speciesist humanism or what Haraway points to as the 'human/animal divide'. The need to examine posthumanism from a 'companion species' (Haraway, 2008) framework instead of a technological approach is urged by critics like Zoe Jacques who states that "posthumanism requires neither the robots nor machines of recent history, but philosophers, writers, and thinkers who are willing to question what it means to be humans and how humans should relate to the wider world" ("Machines, Monsters, and Animals"6). Jacques further opines that the field of posthumanism in this regard, "overlaps with animal studies and ecocriticism- fields that have engaged with much older primary texts" (6). However, it was not until Peter Singer advocated for animal rights in 1975 in his *Animal Liberation*, that the 'animal turn' finds expression within the humanities. Critics like Cary Wolfe, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, Donna Haraway, and a few others call attention to the question of the animal in recent years. For instance, in *Animal Rites: American Culture and the Discourse of Species and Posthumanist Theory,* Wolfe suggests that "much of what we call cultural studies situates itself squarely, if only implicitly, on what looks …, more and more like a fundamental repression that underlies most ethical and political discourse: repressing the question of nonhuman subjectivity, taking it for granted that the subject is always already human" (1). By emphasizing the need to locate 'animal discourses' within the ambit of cultural studies, Wolfe also addresses issues of 'subjectivity' and 'identity' around the site of the animal. Moreover, like Derrida (*The Animal That Therefore I Am*), Wolfe also takes an ethical stance with regard to the animal in

his *Animal Rites*. As Wolfe says, “we need to understand that the ethical and philosophical urgency of confronting the institution of speciesism and crafting a Posthumanist theory of the subject has nothing to do with whether you like animals" (7). Wolfe's works are, therefore, key to understanding the 'constructed' quality of animals particularly in readings of literature and other cultural artifacts.

One of the key spaces where the boundaries between the human and the animal are often problematized is the realm of children’s fantasy. A mouse adopted as a little brother (Stuart Little), animals seeking advice from human doctors (Doctor Dolittle), cats wearing hats (The Cat in the Hat), monsters trying to graduate from university (Monsters University), all of these seemingly impossible tasks, however, operate “beyond the limitations of ontology” (Jacques 3). In other words, children’s fantasy literature has the potential to radically destabilize hierarchies of being, which might seem unfeasible in a realistic setting. Zoe Jacques, in this regard, offers interesting insights into children’s fiction by examining the genre from a Posthumanist lens. As Jacques maintains, “by imagining ‘being’ as operating beyond bodily or environmental constraint, children’s fiction, in its attempt to address young readers, can offer sophisticated interventions into debates about what it means to be human or non-human and offer ethical imaginings of a ‘posthuman’ world” (*Children’s Literature and the Posthuman* 5). A similar view is echoed by Amy Ratelle as she argues that “literature geared toward a child audience reflects and contributes to the cultural tensions created by the oscillation between upholding and undermining the divisions between the human and the animals” (*Animality and Children’s Literature* 4). Ratelle’s book thus takes a posthumanist stand to examining animals as subjects, and the ways in which children's literature and culture "present the boundary between humans and animals, as, at best permeable and in a state of continual flux" (4). The blurring of boundaries between humans and animals is, however, more permissible in children's fantasy as opposed to realistic fiction about animals. Realistic fiction about animals often

highlights the heroic sacrifices, sufferings, and pain of animals, thereby relegating animals as mere objects of human sympathy. Realistic fiction in this regard generates what Sumana Roy terms as 'public guilt'. As Roy notes in her article "Guilt Lit", "we are living in the age of public guilt. So, the literature we consume bears its own 'privilege footprints'. We now approach literature with the expectation that we will feel guilty, will be reminded of our privilege (Roy, *Los Angeles Review of Books*). Fantasy works about animals, on the other hand, give voice to animals. Fantasy books about animals provide space for imagining the inner lives of animals and, it endows animals "with language capabilities to express their thoughts and feelings" (*Talking Animals in Children's Literature* 6). Instead of focusing on the utilitarian or tokenistic approach, modern children's fantasy novels, in the words of Catherine Elick, "run counter to works of animal realism by overwriting animals' vulnerabilities and instead showing them capable of unbalancing human hierarchies and enjoying equitable relationships with people" (6). However, this 'equitable relationship' is further enhanced through the use of anthropomorphism in children's literature. Having said that, it cannot be denied that anthropomorphism for a long time has been instrumental in disseminating 'human values' to children. As Catherine Elick suggests, "modern fantasy espouses anthropomorphism for the very purpose of combating the anthropocentrism that subscribes to a utilitarian scale of value for animals and sees them merely as signifiers of humanity's maturity or tests of human morality, not agents in their own right" (6) Thus, keeping Elick's statement in view, it can be possibly argued that anthropomorphism may not necessarily be anthropocentric. On the other hand, it can be a liberating aspect when viewed from an animality studies perspective.

Drawing on the insightful concepts of 'posthumanism' and 'animality studies' as discussed above, the next section of this chapter attempts to examine how anthropomorphism in select children's fantasy literature from Assam combats what Cary Wolf terms as "the institution of speciesism". (*Animal Rites* 7).

'Animals' in Select fantasy literature for children from Assam

As in most cultures across the world, talking animals have always been a part of Assamese literature and culture. The *Omolageet*, (lullabies) which enriched the treasure house of Assamese children's literature features animal characters with extraordinary features. For instance, 'moruwa phool' (imaginary flower) blooms on the head of the fox, cranes offer 'white dots' to children on their way to the assembly, the moon provides a needle to the child to stitch bags, the sparrow cuts betelnut in the wedding ceremony of the tailless vixen, etc. All these fantastic tasks, obviously unreal to the adult mind, enliven the child's mind with curiosity and imagination. The fantastic elements, however, pervade not only the oral tales and stories but are very much a part of the works of later writers of children's literature. Apart from Lakshminath Bezbaroa, various writers such as Navakanta Barua, Atul Chandra Hazarika, Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi, Toshoprabha Kalita, and Gagan Chandra Adhikary have used mysterious animals in their works to tease the imagination of the readers. Strikingly, the animal characters of the afore-mentioned writers do not act as mediators or substitutes for/of human beings, but they are subjects on their own rights. The selected works for this chapter from different genres – ranging from a folk poem to a novella to an adaptation of a play into a novella – have been chosen because they highlight the significance of the inter-species bond particularly against the backdrop of colonial modernity which brought about massive ecological disruptions in the North- Eastern region. As Rajib Handique notes in his article, "The Ecological and Social Watershed":

> the Britishers carried with them the dominant belief of man's mastery over nature. This perception of superiority was affected largely by events like the industrial revolution, the advancements in science and technology and their colonial expansion. the forests in Assam were regarded as obstruction to the prosperity of the empire and came to be gradually exploited for imperial ends by the British colonial administration. It was

> because of this colonial intervention that forest/land-use in Assam changed its pattern and character and transformed the landscape completely (138).

It is interesting to note that certain writers of the colonial era such as Navakanta Barua and Atul Chandra Hazarika sought to challenge this humanist attitude of man's mastery over nature in their works meant for children. Their works, therefore, define what is now understood as posthuman sensibilities since they challenged the supremist humanist ideologies brought about in the wake of colonialism. Rajiv Handique makes another interesting remark in this regard:

> the history of pre-colonial Assam manifested a close linkage between the people and the environment. Most likely people identified themselves with nature and considered themselves as part of the same. The pre-colonial state was not extractive to the extent of causing any major damage to the environment. People and nature lived in harmony under the circumstances and there was no development of an ideology where forests or for that matter, the natural resources, were regarded as the 'other' (138).

Handique's remark ostensibly highlights how the 'othering' of the environment or 'animality' at large owes much to colonial modernity in Assam. The pre-colonial state, as Handique and other historians argue existed in what Donna Haraway terms as 'companion species' framework. In order to see how 'companion species' framework existed even in the folklore tradition, the first part of this section attempts to analyze a very popular poem, "Ejoni Malini aru Ejupa Phool", compiled by Lakshminath Bezbaroa, from a posthumanist lens.

The poem "Ejoni Malini aru Ejupa Phool" compiled by Lakshminath Bezbaroa in his collection of *Burhi Aair Sadhu* is often prescribed in school textbooks for children. The lucidity of style and the rhythmic melody of the poem appeal to both children and adults alike. However, though outwardly simple, the poem offers fertile grounds for philosophical sophistication, when viewed from a critical Posthumanist perspective. Apparently, the poem is

about a girl who nurtures her plants regularly, but the buds never bloom into flowers. Expressing her concern, the gardener-child asks the tree why it is unable to yield flowers? The tree replies it is unable to bloom because of the cow's act of eating the buds. The girl, then, questions the cow, who in turn blames the cow-herder for not herding it well. The herder blames the cook, the cook blames the wood-keeper and, the chain goes on. The poem, therefore, is about a chain of relations where one act is mutually dependent upon the other. Or to put it the other way, the inadequacy (or lack) of one particular act is a spill-over result of the previous connected activity. For example, the tree is unable to bloom because of the cow's act of eating the buds; the cow, however, can do so because the herder is not herding it properly. The herder, on the other hand, is unable to do his duty because the cook is keeping him hungry. The cook, conversely, is not giving him food because the woodcutter is not providing her with the necessary fuel (wood). The woodcutter, however, is unable to provide fuel because the blacksmith is not providing him an axe. All life forms and their activities in the poem, therefore, exist in their inter-dependence and inter-connectedness with other life forms. The poem, therefore, is precisely an example of 'relationality' which Donna Haraway proffers in her *When Species Meet* (2008). Haraway asserts how we are always 'becoming-with' others, human and non-human, virtual and fleshy, organic and machinic, not as a process, but what she coins as 'worldings' – "an affective relatings of connection, mixing and interdependency" (qtd. in Latimer 5). The poem "Ejoni Malini aru Ejupa Phool" invokes such a concept of worldings where animals, humans, and the environment are all entangled in the telling of the tale. The poem, instead of highlighting the exceptionality of humans as powerful subjects, positions them in a network of a multiplicity of other life forms. In this regard, the poem opens up spaces of what Haraway terms as 'contact zones', where "subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other… which treats the relations in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understanding, and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of

power" (*When Species Meet* 216). By opening such zones, the poem problematizes the deeply hierarchical and hegemonic understandings of the human-animal relationships. In fact, there is no hierarchy of beings as evident in the poem. From the plants (tree) to animals (cow), humans (herder, cook, woodcutter, and blacksmith) to amphibians (frog), abiotic (human activities) to biotic forces (clouds), all share an impartial and ecologically balanced relationship based on the premise of 'interspecies communication'. Every single being in the poem, human, animal, and the environment in general, is given equal voice to articulate his/her/its concern. And, in doing so, the poem undercuts the possibility of any 'speciesist supremacy'.

One of the key formulations of Haraway's posthumanism is blurring the traditionally accepted boundaries between 'nature' and 'culture'. Haraway mentions in her *Companion Species Manifesto* how conceiving 'nature' and 'culture' as polar opposites is utterly foolish. Instead, she calls attention to a site called 'natureculture' where the traditionally accepted divisions between nature and culture are collapsed. As Haraway puts it, "*The Companion Species* is, thus, about the implosion of nature and culture in the relentlessly historically specific, joint lives of dogs and people, who are bonded in significant otherness" (16). Keeping Haraway's formulation in view, it can be argued that the poem "Ejoni Malini" also offers provocative grounds for examining the collapse of the nature/culture binary, through an engagement of 'significant otherness'. Anthropologists are highly critical regarding the origin of nature/culture dualism. While some argue that the nature/culture binary is a result of the post-Enlightenment world, others claim that such dichotomy existed since ancient times. Despite the contentious views, what is commonly accepted by anthropologists is the fact that "the high value placed on culture has caused the anthropocentric domination of nature" ("The Culture of Exploitation"). However, this very 'anthropocentric' viewpoint is subverted in the poem "Ejoni Malini" by destabilizing the nature/culture binary. It is evident from the above discussion how the poem "Ejoni Malini" embodies a multi-species sociality, by telling a story

of co-habitation and inter-dependency. However, by entwining different entities into a larger web of bio-social life, the poem problematizes the traditionally accepted divisions of nature and culture. Going by the traditional definitions, if a strict line of division is maintained, the plant, the cow, the cloud, rain, and the frog fall within the ambit of 'nature'. The cow-herder, the cook, the woodcutter, the blacksmith, and the charcoal merchant belong to the cultural domain. However, such a divisive line cannot sustain in the poem as it invokes a world where 'cultural activities' and 'natural actions' are co-constitutive. For instance, the woodcutter needs embers to make an axe, but the merchant is unable to provide embers to the woodcutter because of the clouds which give incessant rain and extinguish the fire. The clouds, on the other hand, cannot help raining as the croaking of the frog has the inevitable effect. The poem finally ends on a note where the frog refuses to abstain from croaking because it is a legacy it has inherited from its grandfather. It can, therefore, be established that every activity in the poem, be it 'natural' or 'cultural' is interwoven with and is an extension of one another. The poem, therefore, presents a porous and collective understanding of the world, where life sustains beyond the ambit of the bracketed selfhood.

The second text which this chapter discusses is Navakanta Barua's novella, highlighting his eco-centric vision. In the Preface to his novella, *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur*, Navakanta Barua acknowledges how he was inspired by Lewis Carroll and Sukumar Rai to produce a similar 'moral free' book for children. As Barua notes, "as you grow up and read the stories of Lewis Carroll and Sukumar Rai, you will find certain similarities between their works and mine. Perhaps, those are the best works anyone could ever read… On the one side are those writers, and, you (children) are on the other side. What lies between the two extremes are my 'creations'" (Adhikari 118). Redressing the problems of didactics, Barua further asserts that, "the stories of Brother Grimm are wonderful – just like Grandma's tales; the moral values of Panchatantra and Aesop are also invaluable, but somehow you (children) do not appear to be

there. In fact, we (adults) do not have the right to impose our inflexible judgments on children" (Adhikari118). The *Preface* clarifies the point that Navakanta Barua was influenced by the nonsense genre of literary tradition, and particularly by the works of Carroll for its subversive potential. As Linda M Shires (1988) suggests, "fantasy, nonsense and parody each question the status of the real in a different, and differently disturbing way, pushing language and meaning toward dangerous limits of dissolution… however, what is at stake- whether in the unreal of fantasy, or the non-real of nonsense – is ourselves" (267-268). Extending Shires' remark a little further, from 'ourselves' to 'ourselves' – as superior human beings, it can be argued that Navakanta Barua deploys nonsense and fantasy in his novella, *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur* to challenge this very prospect of human supremacy as opposed to animal inferiority. Barua's interest in animal rights and animal welfare is evident from his poems, articles and other works, where he talks about the estranged relationship between humans and animals. One such poem is "*Dekhiya potia Baghor Gaan*" (The Leopard's song) where the Leopard questions unjust killings of animals by humans, and requests human beings to restore their rightful home – the forest to it:

Haw maw khau

Moitu manuh nakhau

Prokritiye dise muk poxu aaronyir

Taakey kha ijibon kotau (Adhikari 245).

Haw mau Khau

I don't need to eat humans

Nature provides me beasts from the forest,

Whom I relish and cling to life (245).

In another poem, *Goror Gaan* (The Rhinoceros's Song), the Rhino poses a similar question to humanity through its song:

Mur kopalot edale xing

Tumalukebula sorgo!

Seiyai je mathun prokritiye diya

Aatmo roikhar astro!

Tat jadunio ouxod ni

Nai bhut khedamontra

Ane bur misakothat kiyonu

Nakhisa jivan mur! (Adhikari 250)

I have only one horn on my head

People call it *sorgo*,

That is the only gift bestowed by nature

for my self-defence.

My horn has no medicinal value,

nor it has the power the cast spell,

What do you take my life?

Relying on those lies (245)!

Navakanta Barua, through the voice of the Rhinoceros, poignantly tells human beings how they are poached for the single-horn they possess. The Rhino explains through its song that its horn

does not have any medicinal value, nor does it possess any supernatural power. It is merely an instrument of self-defense, bestowed by nature to the animal. Human beings, therefore should not kill it for their selfish motives. Barua's deep concern for animals and the environment finds expression in his works such as *Hey Aranya hey Mahanagar* (O Woods O City!) *Kramasha Eti Sadhukatha* (Progress is a Story), *Eyat Nodi Asil* (Here was a River), etc. apart from the children's poems discussed above. However, in his nonsense fiction, *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur* (The Vixen Reaches Ratanpur), Barua seeks to erase the boundaries between humans and animals by deploying a playful but subversive logic.

The discussion on the theoretical aspects of posthumanism and animality studies makes it understandable that the 'animal', for a long time, has occupied a peripheral position as opposed to its counterpart – the human. As Derrida notes in his essay "The Animal That Therefore I am" (2008), "the animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to another living creature" (392). However, despite the linguistic complexities involved, the word 'animal', according to Erica Fudge has some transformative power, insofar as it draws attention to the complexities of our lived relations with non-human others. In the light of Fudge's remark, this paper seeks to explore how the fantastic encounters between the child-protagonist Joon and the mysterious animals challenge the centrality and superiority of the 'human'.

One of the prime reasons for human beings to justify their domination over 'animals' is 'rationality', 'intellectual power', and/or physical strength. In Navakanta Barua's *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur*, however, the child-protagonist in his fantastic journey encounters 'strange creatures' – beasts, birds, talking-roads, moon, etc, who challenge those very notions of human authority/power. As the story begins the child protagonist embarks on his journey to *Ratanpur*, the fictional place he comes across in his grandmother's tales. The very fact that Joon wants to visit a fictional place sets the fantastic tone of the story. At the very outset, Joon encounters a

crossroad where ten intersecting roads beckon him. Strangely enough, all the roads can talk multiple languages, and they all lure Joon, each outdoing the other in enticing him. By giving voice to inanimate objects as roads, Navakanta Barua does something more than an anthropomorphic appropriation: he challenges the very premise based upon which humanity has always denied subjecthood to 'animals'- the ability to speak (Derrida 379). The superior position of humans is further challenged as the story progresses. Upon taking a least travelled road, Joon encounters a kite, which was carrying a bamboo net (Saloni), with two wrestlers on it. As there was no audience to watch their game, the wrestlers come across a fisher-woman, who promises a *chonda* fish to the one who loses the game. Soon after the wrestlers are being carried off by the kite, Joon was also taken off by the same kite, and he could see that the wrestlers are not wrestling, as the game was designed to have no winners. In the hope of getting a *chonda* fish, each of the wrestlers gets up, pretends to fight, and falls. Finding the whole situation very absurd, Joon reminds them that they were far away from getting any reward since they were already being carried off by a kite. The wrestlers, then, tell Joon that it is not any ordinary kite, but must be a Brahminy Kite (*Ganga Siloni*), and, terrified, both of them jump off the bamboo. Generally, wrestlers are known for their physical strength and agility. However, the fact that these two wrestlers were carried off by a bird undermines the superiority of human beings as physically powerful over vulnerable beings. Furthermore, upon realizing that they were in the grasp of a bird, the wrestlers assumed the bird to be an extraordinary one, and, terrified, they jumped off the flying *saloni* in the sky. What is interesting in the above episode is the fact that more than Joon, it is the wrestlers who were terrified of the bird. It was only after the wrestlers jumped off the net, that Joon was actually scared of the bird. The kite, though a bird, is projected as much more powerful than the strongest human beings. It is not just Joon – a child, who was scared of a 'tiny' bird, but, in Navakanta Barua's wonderland,

even the strongest humans, such as the wrestlers are rendered powerless against vulnerable animals.

So far as rationality or 'intellectual power' is concerned, the novella presents events that challenge this assumption. The right of animals to knowledge and erudition becomes key to unsettle the human-animal divide. At one instance, Joon encounters an ant with a waistcoat, like the rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*. Interestingly enough, the ant has knowledge of geography, and its rather obscure questions frustrate Joon:

> Do you know that the earth is round?
>
> Yes, it moves around the sun.
>
> And?
>
> And it moves on its axis?
>
> What is the axis?
>
> As if I don't know, it means the spinal cord.
>
> Does the earth have a vertebral cord?
>
> It is visible on the map, not in reality.
>
> Very good! Ten out of ten (Adhikari 127).

The above conversation highlights how Joon was being tested and evaluated by the ant. Joon's position as a superior human being with regard to knowledge is constantly undermined through his conversations with the ant. At times, Joon finds it so annoying that he vents his anger by saying that: "you don't act too smart like my teacher Nityananda sir. You are being too arrogant" (Adhikari 126). Joon's act of comparing the ant with authoritarian figures like elders equates the child/adult binary with the animal/human binary. Joon is wary of authoritarian

figures like his teacher who always questions the children and imposes his authority upon them. The ant's rather intelligent questions pose a similar threat to Joon's sense of stability as a human. The fact that an insect of the smallest kind could know so much more is very disturbing to him. However, as the story unfolds, Joon's attempt to re-instate his superior position is further undermined through his conversation with other animals. His exchange with the stork is one such instance where Joon's presumed rationality is challenged through the bird's rather 'absurd' statements. The fact that Barua imbues nonhuman creatures with more rationality is evident, as Joon assumes that the bird is familiar with all locations and places. Joon's conversation with the stork leaves him in a state of utter perplexity as he couldn't make sense of the bird's 'irrational' statements:

> Let's sleep, okay! Sleep off! The fox has to catch its prey.
>
> No… I am not at all sleepy, I won't sleep.
>
> *Ai o dehi*! Don't worry! Everything will be alright! Let us share the sleep.
>
> Can anyone share sleep? …
>
> Who says no? You don't know anything (Adhikari 131).

The Stork's remark utterly frustrates and annoys Joon as he feels dumb-headed. Interestingly, the stork doesn't just make some blind statements but goes further to elucidate how sleep can be shared with proper examples from mathematics (*bhognasor anko*). Although the stork does not produce any 'reasoned argument' from Joon's perspective, it seems perfectly rational when seen in terms of the logic which Navakanta Barua sets up in the story. What appears absurd to Joon, is 'rationality' as and when it is expressed through the voice of the stork. In another instance, when Joon meets an old man and his dog from an old tale, the anthropocentric distinction of man as the sole possessor of language is subverted. It becomes evident as the dog assumes Joon to be a gorilla and asks him, "Gorilla, Gorilla, where is your tail?" (Adhikari

138). Joon's angry and fearful response to the dog that "I am not a Gorilla, and I do not have a tail either" (138) shows his anxiety and frustration for being ridiculed by a 'nonhuman other'. The dog, then, offers a handkerchief to Joon with the picture of a Gorilla and asks him if Joon is not a gorilla. To this Joon replies rather bluntly, "this is not a mirror, but a handkerchief, and, I am not a Gorilla" (Adhikari 139). The dog's assumption seems incorrect to Joon from an anthropocentric viewpoint, which considers human language as one of the necessary means to access 'reality.' However, by giving room to a multiplicity of voices (languages) such as that of the ant, the stork, the dog, and other 'fantastical creatures' in the story, Barua attempts to upset the presumed rationality of human beings in the text.

The value of reason is continuously subverted as the story unfolds. Joon's act of seeking meaning in rationality is constantly undermined through the deployment of nonsense in the text. Upon reaching *Ratanpur*, Joon meets the erudite fox who challenges him through a series of nonsensical word games. Joon, however, fails repeatedly and is embarrassed by these failures. The fox, by repeatedly testing Joon on the basis of nonsense prosody, not only provides an insight into how things work in the wonderland, but also challenges the humanist notion of language as a marker of 'rationality'. Joon's encounters with these intelligent animals, therefore, challenge humanity's belief in 'rational superiority' and subvert the naturalized assumption of human domination over other animals.

One of the interesting facts about Barua's novella *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur* is that the child-protagonist, Joon, is accompanied either by some non-human animals or inanimate objects throughout his journey. Joon's fantastic encounters with different creatures, therefore, offer provocative ways to think of Haraway's idea of "companion species" in more compelling ways. There are many instances where the human-animal "intra-action" (Haraway, 2003) finds expression in the novella. Joon's first thought upon seeing the ten talking-cross-roads was to meet the vixen:

> Shall I reach Aaita's story's *Ratanpur*?
>
> Sigh! Had I met the vixen, I would have asked her.
>
> One is scared of the vixen only at night, not during days (Adhikari 120).

Joon's statements ostensibly show how the narrative seeks to erase the incommensurable difference between humans and animals by delineating an inter-species relationship. The fact that Joon is not 'scared' and 'apprehensive' of the animals and instead, he seeks guidance and assistance from talking animals, birds, beasts, and inanimate objects highlights the inter-species companionship in the story. When Joon met the ant for the first time, he was responsive to the ant's request to keep his magnifying glass aside:

> Please keep that mirror aside, I shall turn deaf.
>
> Why?
>
> When I see you through the glass, your voice also gets magnified along with your body (Adhikari 127).

Joon hurriedly kept his glass apart and responded, "ok! Now, tell me, what were you saying" (127)? Joon, by responding to the ant engages in what Donna Haraway terms as *respecere* in a companion species framework. *Respecere*, according to Haraway involves respect. It doesn't simply mean to "look at", but rather "to hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention, to have courteous regard for, to esteem" (Haraway 19). Although Joon projects his human exceptionalism and feels challenged at times, he holds *respecere* for the 'nonhuman other' and, ultimately, he learns to coexist with them. Joon learns a very important lesson from his journey: he is not rationally superior or exceptional to the 'non-human' animals and objects. By the time he reaches Ratanpur, Joon accepts the fact that the fox, the dog, and other fantastic creatures are far more knowing than him. His communication

with the fantastic creatures bridges the species divide as Joon learns to respect other beings as ‘fellow creatures’. The portrayal of animal-human relationships not only dismantles the essentialist notion of a superior human ontology, but the narrative of *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur* also offers fertile terrain for 'companion-species' framework.

The last text examined in this chapter is Atul Chandra Hazarika’s *Nila Chorai* which will be read from an eco-centric perspective.

Jacques Derrida, in his essay "The Animal that therefore I am," is highly critical of the Enlightenment philosophers who never questioned the singularity of the term ‘the animal’- “a name men have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other” (23). By raising serious questions about ‘the animal’ Derrida attempts to uncover the long-established humanist hierarchies which prioritize the 'human' over ‘the animal’- but more importantly, his question on the animal opens up new avenues to locate the animal in a web of ‘multispecies interconnectedness’. As Derrida says, “among nonhumans and separate from nonhumans there is an immense multiplicity of living things that cannot in any way be homogenized, except by means of violence and willful ignorance, within the category of what is called the animal or animality in general” (“The Animal that therefore” 45). Derrida’s emphasis on the ‘multiplicity of living things’ underscores how animals- both human and nonhuman, are densely interconnected and interdependent in a multispecies world. Keeping such a framework in view, this section attempts to explore the interconnectedness between humans and non-human nature in Atul Chandra Hazarika’s children’s fantasy novella *Nila Chorai* from a critical animal studies perspective.

Atul Chandra Hazarika is one of the most prolific writers of the twentieth century modern Assam. Apart from several plays and anthologies of poetry, Hazarika also has thirty-five books for children to his credit. Hazarika, in fact, was one of the early translators who introduced

children's classics from across the globe to the readers of Assam. Some of his most prominent translated texts for children are *Isopor Sadhu* (1951), *Opesorir Sadhu* (1952), *Junali Dekhar Sonali Sadhu* (1956), *Andersonor Sadhu* (1960), *Grimor Sadhu* (1961), *Lorar Jatak* (1973), etc. Based on Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck's fantasy fairytale *The Blue Bird* (1908), *Nila Chorai* by Hazarika is another significant translated text for children. The interplay between children's literature and the translational process is not a recent phenomenon. As Emer O Sullivan remarks, children's literature, "has, since its inception, been a site of intense translational activity, and works from other languages have been a key to its very development" ("Children's Literature and Translation Studies" 451). However, translation, as it is commonly understood, is a very complex process and, several factors are considered while producing a translation for the readers of the target culture. Fortunately, a translator of children's literature, as Zohar Shavit argues, "can permit himself great liberties regarding the text because of the peripheral position children's literature occupies in the polysystem. He is allowed to manipulate the text in various ways" ("Translation of Children's Literature" 171) as long as he subscribes to the principles on which translation for children is usually based. Atul Chandra Hazarika also seems to have taken creative liberty with his novella *Nila Chorai,* thereby adding an eco-pedagogical approach to his text. Having said that, it is important to note that in the source text *The Blue Bird,* ecology does have a very strong presence, and possibly that could be one of the reasons for Hazarika's selection of the source text. However, what makes Hazarika's novel distinctively eco-centric is his emphasis on an interconnected worldview- an inclusive awareness where the boundaries between humans, non-human animals, and inanimate entities are in a state of constant flux. Nandini Thiyagarajan in her article "We are not in this world Alone" comments that, "the presence of animals in the stories we tell demonstrates that human nature is an interspecies relationship" (*Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature* 2). She further notes that "humans are densely entangled, interconnected and interdependent with other

species. We can look to stories to learn to embrace connectivity instead of isolation, being with instead of being above; the animals in our stories are evidence that we already know this" (2). In the light of the above remarks, it can be argued that Atul Chandra Hazarika also attempts to tell a similar story of an interspecies relationship, and the presence of the animals and non-animal entities in his story is a testimony to this fact. Like the original play *The Blue Bird*, Hazarika's novella, *Nila Chorai* also begins with the central protagonists Tiltil and Mitil's quest for the blue bird of happiness. In their attempt to save the life of the little girl of a hunch-back woman, Tiltil and Mitil, the two siblings, embark on their journey to the land of the blue bird and, interestingly, they are accompanied by a cat, a dog, sugar, fire, water, milk and a fairy-princess. The tone for an interspecies connectedness is perceived the very moment the readers realize that the protagonists depend heavily upon animals, inanimate objects, and supernatural beings in their quest for the blue bird. Before embarking on the journey, however, Tiltil is presented with a diamond-studded hat that possesses the power to reveal the soul of every animate and inanimate thing on earth. The fairy Chitralekha's account is particularly insightful as she says that, "this little piece of diamond possesses some extraordinary power which would help you to see the inside of things…these are the hours of your life which was confined in this clock. On being released, they are expressing their happiness through dance and songs" (*Nila Chorai* 25). The attribution of life and language to various inanimate objects and non-human animals in the narrative is more than mere personification. By ascribing a soul to both animate and non-animate things, the narrative allows room for what Povinelli terms as 'geontology'- a term used over "'biontology' or 'biopower' that would be properly inclusive of all elements that make up the planet and would not unduly privilege living organisms" ("Translating Animals" 90). As already mentioned, the original text by Materlinck also holds a strong ecological connection; however, the 'multi-species embeddedness' in the original text is emphasized less directly. On the other hand, Hazarika seems to be more overt when it comes

to environmental consciousness. In the translation, Hazarika seems to elaborate more upon textual elements that evoke the human-animal-nonanimal sensitivity. Additionally, at times, Hazarika also takes creative liberties to trans create scenes which would not only challenge human exceptionalism but also open up, to put in the words of Donna Haraway, spaces of interspecies "contact zones". Hazarika's obvious diversion from the original play takes place particularly with regard to the character of the cat. While in the original play, the cat acts as an antagonist who puts forth various hurdles and obstacles in the protagonist's journey, in Hazarika's *Nila Chorai*, the cat acts as a rebellious being who expresses concern over human dominion and control over non-human animals and entities. The cat in Hazarika's *Nila Chorai* acts as a spokesperson of the animals, who time and again reminds them of human cruelty against non-human beings and things. The conversation between the cat and the other animals is particularly indicative of the animal-human divide that seemed to have emerged over time. Hazarika trans-creates a scene where the cat laments for the current plight of the animals:

> All of you are aware of the injustice meted out to animals by humans. Yet, how unashamedly you sit quietly without retorting!
>
> How beautiful those days were! When the cruel humans couldn't exercise their dominion over us.
>
> How independent we were then! How could you forget those wonderful days? (*Nila Chorai* 26).

The cat constantly warns the animals and the entities that if the two children are successful in achieving the blue bird, then, that would bring an end to their existence. By possessing the divine bird, humans would get to know the unknown, and, they would be in a position to master the universe, according to the cat. Therefore, the non-human beings and things should leave no stone unturned in obstructing the children's journey. The cat's apprehension is particularly

suggestive of a world where humans assert their exceptionality by creating clear lines of division between themselves and the rest of the non-human world. However, a deeper reading of Hazarika's text would also reveal that Tiltil and Mitil's quest for the blue bird is actually a quest to reweave a harmonious relationship between human subjects and the non-human natural environment. From the very beginning, the protagonists, Tiltil and Mitil seem to be amicable to their fellow companions. Unlike Navakanta Barua's child protagonist Joon, Hazarika's Tiltil does not assert intellectual or physical superiority over the non-humans in normal circumstances. In fact, Tiltil appears to be looking for ways to negotiate humanity's association with the non-human world. This is particularly evident in the forest scene where Tiltil and his companions meet sentient trees and talking animals for the first time. After a few failed attempts, Tiltil and his companions finally arrive at the forest in search of the blue bird, where countless trees such as *Bor, Aahot, Bel, Bokul, Sal,* Nageswar, and tress of numerous species were chattering and walking in the forest grove. Here, it has to be mentioned that, by twisting the original text with culture-specific locales, Hazarika attempts to familiarize children with their own ecological zone. However, more than that, he seems to instil an eco-centric awareness among the children through the narrative of the forest scene. After observing the walking trees in the forest, Tiltil was quick enough to enquire about the blue bird of happiness. Strikingly, his conversation with the trees sounds very reconciling:

> Tiltil: Sir, my name is Tiltil. I have come to this place in search of the blue bird. How many birds would you give me?
>
> Banyan tree: Oh! You are the wood-cutter's son. Even though you are not known to me, I know your father very well. He has stripped me off my lineage. In my family alone, your father has slain six hundred sons, six hundred brothers and sisters, three hundred and eighty daughters-in-law, and twelve thousand great-grandsons.

Tiltil: I have no idea sir, but my father has no malice in his heart (*Nila Chorai 28*).

Tiltil's comment, which is incorporated in the translated version of *Nila Chorai* is very significant from an ecocritical perspective, as it opens avenues for some reconciliation between humans and non-human nature. The little boy who is ignorant of his ancestor's misdeeds is made aware of humanity's wrong-doings by the trees and animals in the forest scene. However, instead of challenging the tree, Tiltil very politely seeks to bridge the gap between humans and non-human beings. It was not until the animals and the trees in the forest attack the little boy to avenge human cruelty that Tiltil takes recourse to his pocket knife for self-defense. The literal war between the humans and the non-human animals and trees in the novella *Nila Chorai* is apparently a physical manifestation of the long-standing divide between humans and non-humans. Tiltil, who is patiently waiting for the animals' approval for giving away the blue bird could not have imagined even in his dreams that such a war would take place. The sudden attack by the animals and trees in the forest is shocking to Tiltil because of his lack of knowledge about the deteriorating human-animal issues. As the ox and the donkey move fiercely towards Tiltil, he asks the animals:

Tiltil: What makes you so violent?

Donkey: Today I shall take revenge on humanity.

Tiltil: But what have we done?

Sheep: As if you don't know; humans have stripped off our skins, eaten us up for decades (28).

The animals do not want to miss the opportunity to unleash their vengeance against humanity and, therefore all the trees and animals attempt to attack not only Tiltil and Mitil but also the 'traitor' dog who took the side of the humans. It was only because of the fairy's timely intervention and the dog's unwavering loyalty that Tiltil and Mitil are saved. Interestingly, the

war between the humans and the animals is very much a part of Materlinck's original play *The Blue Bird*. What Hazarika has additionally incorporated is, however, a section where the fairy cautions Tiltil of the adverse effects of animal/nature exploitation. After Tiltil manages to press the magical diamond on his hat, the animals return to normalcy. However, an anxious Tiltil asks the fairy: "What was that? Why were they being so violent?" (27). The fairy's reply that, "everyone is on one side, whereas the human beings are on the other side" (28) is crucial because it ostensibly points how human exceptionalism can lead to adverse consequences if human actions are not regulated. By adding a new section in his novella, Hazarika emphasizes the lessons learnt by Tiltil after the war. Tiltil's realization that the animals have a very powerful voice and agency, although they seem calm and silent is crucial in fostering a new relationship of interspecies connectedness. The fairy asks Tiltil not to forget the adventures, and particularly the lessons behind them. In other words, the fairy imparts to him the lesson that humans are not exceptional and given a chance, animals can retaliate against humanity's offences. Hazarika, therefore, through the voice of the fairy, attempts to alert readers, particularly the child readers about the ethical responsibility of the humans towards their non-human counterparts. In this regard, his novella *Nila Chorai* can be considered as an 'eco-pedagogical' text in the light of the emerging scholarship on ecocriticism.

Lawrence Buell, in his ground-breaking work, "The Environmental Imagination" argues that, in an environmental text, "the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device, but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (7). Extending Buell's argument to Hazarika's novella *Nila Chorai*, it can be similarly argued that the non-human environment in *Nila Chorai* does not exist merely as a metaphorical device, but the entangled nature of human and non-human union conveys a relationship where one site of ontology implicates with the other. The trees, the animals, and the other physical entities in the narrative ranging from fire to water to milk are articulative enough, and all of

them are part of a world that is neither exclusively human nor exclusively non-human. The interconnectedness of the human and the non-human environment in the narrative makes it possible for animals to speak for humans and vice-versa. For instance, the dog and the other entities except for the cat, constantly support Tiltil and Mitil throughout the journey. Whenever the cat attempts to intensify the gulf between humans and the non-human environment, the dog intervenes and speaks in favor of his human companions. So far as water and fire are concerned, they also maintain a composed relationship with the humans and animals despite their superior ontological stance. As Zoe Jacques maintains, "water is a site of contested ontology, providing a location where human dominance is exposed as partial and fractured" (*Children's Literature and the Posthuman* 139-140). Similarly, fire also holds a superior ontological status, often complicating strict human dualisms. To bring back Buell's 'framing device' fire and water in Hazarika's *Nila Chorai*, are not used as mere metaphorical devices to embellish human anger and tears. On the other hand, these two entities retain their essence even after being fantastically enlivened. Precisely, because of the threat which fire and water pose to other beings due to their elemental essence, the fairy warns them to keep their distance from the other companions before embarking on the journey. And, remarkably, throughout the journey fire and water are alerted not to harm any other beings or entities. This sense of 'compassionate kinship' among humans, animals, and the physical entities is poignantly depicted by Hazarika in the hour of separation, where, fire and water refuse to kiss the children before departing, as their embrace would only harm the children:

> Fire: If my kisses hurt you, I won't touch. Please, don't forget me. I am a friend to humanity. You will always find me in the hearth or lights and candles. I will help in getting your food cooked. In winters, I shall provide you warmth. Adieu!
>
> Water: My dearest children. Just Like fire, even I won't hurt you with my kisses. I am kind to human beings. Always love water bodies such as wells, streams, rivers, etc.

> When you sit down in the evenings beside the streams, try to understand my language. …I will always be happy to serve you irrespective of my form…You will always find me in pitchers, vessels, rivers, and ponds (30).

The presence of an inter-species, inter-entity relatedness is touchingly captured by Hazarika in the translated version which seems to be absent in the original text. For Hazarika, what matters more than the literal journey, are the lessons the children learnt from the adventure. Although Tiltil and Mitil are not successful in getting the literal blue bird, they received the most important lesson of life: happiness as symbolized by the blue bird, cannot be achieved through human exceptionalism, but through a collective effort that doesn't exclude the non-human environment.

Conclusion

It is needless to say that the recent COVID pandemic which wreaked havoc on the planet is triggered by anthropogenic activities. The resulting impacts of the 'viral spillover' are crystal-clear to humanity, and, if anthropocentric normativity is still not resisted, the consequences would be far more devastating. In the light of the recent pandemic in particular, and the ecological crisis in general, what has children's literature to offer to humankind? According to Zoe Jacques, "children's fantasy, in all of its genres, modes, and indeed, historical periods, can be deeply complex in negotiating alternate modes of authority or in destabilizing authority itself" (*Children's Literature and the Posthuman* 239). In view of Jacques' remark, it can be said that children's literature, particularly the works considered in this chapter, offers illuminating ways to re-conceptualize humanity's relationship with the non-human world. Animality, to use the word in an extended sense, emerges in its multi-faceted forms across the works of the selected authors. From socializing children in a new era to negotiating with current ecological crises, animals or animality offers a kaleidoscopic view of humanity's relationship

with the non-human environment. While the animals in Bezbaroa's *Junuka* ensure a socializing function, Navakanta Baruah's *Siyali Palegoi Ratunpur* destabilizes human exceptionality through a posthumanist play of rationality and power. The folk-poem *Ejoni Malini* takes a posthumanist stance by blurring the nature-culture boundary and, Hazarika's *Nila Chorai* seeks ways to reweave a harmonious relationship between humans and non-humans. The animals in the stories, therefore, offers new insights into human-animal studies, and in doing so, the chapter offers fertile grounds to examine other kinds of exploitation and violence across axes of identity, such as race, gender, ethnicity, etc., of which gender will be taken up in the next chapter.

Notes

[1.] *Chonda* fish, scientifically known as chandanama is a species of fresh water fish commonly found in Assam.

[2.] *Saloni* is an Assamese traditional net made of bamboo strips. It is mostly used to separate rice from husk.

[3.] *Ai o dehi* is an expression in the Assamese language which is used to indicate sympathy.

[4.] Ratanpur is a fictional place in Assamese lullabies.

[5.] *Bor*, *Aahot*, *Bel*, *Bokul*, and *Sal* are different species of plants found in Assam.

[6.] The exact year of publication of *Nila Chorai* by Atul Chandra Hazarika is uncertain.

Chapter V

Violence in Children's Literature of Assam

Introduction

The prevalence of violence in children's literature is not a recent phenomenon, and it dates back to folk and fairy tales of oral traditions across cultures. As Maureen Nimon (1993) observes in her article "Violence in Children's Literature Today", "for centuries, children's literature has encompassed stories in which the virtuous were rewarded and evildoers suffered retribution. Historically, violence was frequently part of the punishment. Children are directly confronted with responsibility for their choices and actions and the likelihood of severe punishments following closely upon wrongdoing" (28). Nimon's conviction is echoed by Christina Moustakis (1982) in her article "A Plea for Heads: Illustrating Violence in Fairy Tales", where she argues that 'fairy tale handles justice and retribution in a manner that young children understand' (29). She further opines that, "in the black-and-white morality of a fairy tale, a youth is beset with trials in the ritualized-by-tests passage to maturity, and the evil-doer who attempts to take the life of or usurp the rightful place of the hero, is punished" (Moustakis, 29).

The above observations apparently showcase how violence is used as a didactic and instructive tool in children's literature, for admonishing and/or punishing evildoers. In the light of the above discussion, it is worth reflecting on the recurrent motif of violence in children's literature of Assam, especially fairy tales where women's bodies are subjected to gory forms of violence. The portrayal of extreme forms of violence in folk and fairy tales is ostensibly justified on the ground that the narratives serve as a tool for the didactic instruction for children. But closer observation of the 'actions of violence', as portrayed in children's literature, would reveal that the victims of violence most often, if not always, belong to the socially marginalized

sections. Such an observation brings to light that 'representations' are not neutral, and there is a certain unwarranted power structure behind the discourse of violence and ‘structural inequality’. Mavis Reimer (1997) raises a very interesting question in this regard, "violence is always about power and force in some sense. Is it possible that the difference in the representation of violence in different kinds of texts has to do with the production and reproduction of a society in which most children are meant to be inducted into a system in which they are targets and perpetrators of violence?" Representations being cultural artefacts of a particular society have the potential to target children for the perpetuation of certain ideologies. In the context of gender, the discursive construction of violence or to use Spivak's term 'epistemic violence' (1988) is used as a tool 'to maintain a phallogocentric system of knowledge and power' (Burfoot, 2006, xvi).

While violence in children's literature can be purportedly perpetuated through the means of 'epistemic violence', it can also perform a kind of 'strategic counter-violence' through contemporary adaptive practices. Robin McCallum argues in his book, *Screen Adaptations and the Politics of Childhood* that adaptations are “also a powerful way of transmitting, sustaining and reshaping the cultural capital that literary texts bring with them” (1). It can be argued from McCallum’s insight that while adaptions play a key role in ‘transmitting’ and ‘sustaining’ the violence embedded in the pre-texts, they can also play a transformative role in ‘reshaping’ cultural ideologies through the discursive use of language/knowledge. This chapter examines the representation of different forms of violence in both children’s literature and cinematic texts by focusing on selected folk and fairy tales and contemporary adaptations of thesein films such as *Ishu* (2017) by Utpal Borpuzari and *Kothanodi* (2015) by Bhaskar Hazarika. A substantial section of the chapter attempts to examine how the adaptations of these films deconstruct ideologically constructed structures such as gender, class and ableness.

Section I of the fifth chapter attempts to locate certain forms of social inequalities in selected folk and fairy tales from Assam. It attempts to see how violence is inextricably linked with cultural forms of domination. The section tries to address the unequal and exploitative relations in the light of issues of self-censorship and editorial intervention. Section II of the chapter attempts to provide a theoretical perspective on adaptations and children's literature in general, with a special focus on children's films in Assam. It will see how retellings accommodate newer understandings of violence resulting from social inequalities. Section III examines cultural forms of violence through a postmodern lens by focusing on Bhaskar Hazarika's retelling of *Burhi Aair Sadhu* in his film *Kothanodi*. Section IV examines how the national award-winning Assamese film, *Ishu*, by Utpal Borpuzari, deconstructs the discursive practice of gendered violence such as witch-hunting through the lens of the child protagonist. The section attempts to see how the film offers new insights on violence by emphasizing the child's perception of *hingsa*. Section V offers a brief conclusion to the chapter.

Fairy Tales from Assam and the 'Hard Facts'

"That's just a myth", "It's nothing but a fairy tale". Referring to such statements as "insulting catchphrases" Maria Tatar tells us in her "Introduction" to *The Hard Facts of Grimms' Fairy Tales* that, "they remind us of how the symbolic stories we tell- no matter how much they help us navigate the real- are dismissed as trivial or disdained as lies…But these seeming trifles can transmit higher truth, in part because they conceal as much as they reveal, challenging us to unpack the wisdom that drives their plots" (xiii). Fairy tales as people's cultural narratives talk a great deal about real-life heroes and heroines in the form of exemplary stories. Fairy tales also guide our actions and help us to navigate the perils and possibilities of the real world as scholars such as Bruno Bettelheim, Zack Zipes, Maria Warner, and others time and again, remind us. However, the 'therapeutic value' and 'moral education' of folk and fairy tales do not work without what Bronislaw Malinowski calls "a high coefficient of

weirdness". As Tatar rightly observes, "fairy tales deliver not only the shock of beauty, as Max Luthi puts it, but also jolts of horror, rewiring our brains and also charging them up, challenging us…to think more and think harder about the harsh realities exposed in them" (xviii). While Tatar's comment comes in the light of the 'dark' 'gory' and 'violent' aspects of fairy tales in the context of Brother Grimm's *Nursery and Household Tales*, it undoubtedly offers fertile grounds to launch a similar inquiry into our cultural values. A closer examination would reveal that many of the fairy tales emanating from the regional scenario of Assam also highlight similar cruelty, horror, atrocity, fear, and violence as reflected in the works of the Brothers Grimm. Notwithstanding the cross-cultural similarities of folktales across the globe, does such violent depiction, to bring in Mavis Reimer's question once again, speak at large about the unwarranted power structure which shaped the tales in accordance with the social and moral codes of the Assamese society of those times? In other words, what role did the prevailing moral and social code of the Assamese society play in informing/shaping the tales meant for children? One such answer can be discerned in Herbert Kohl's book, *Should We Burn Babar? Questioning Power in Children's Literature* where he talks about the hidden implications of power relationships in children's literature. As Herbert Kohl argues, "power relationships in literature reveal the politics of both the story, and frequently, the author. Power relationships also provide examples and models for children of social and moral behaviour" (4-5). In order to see how power relations operated in the representations of violence in folk and fairy tales of Assam, it is indeed imperative to unearth the dark, hard facts of Assamese fairy tales.

In one of the fairy tales entitled "*Tula aru Teja*" from Bezbaroa's compilation of *Burhi Aair Sadhu*, Bezbaroa projects a bone-chilling image of violent retaliation where a king punishes his step-sister-in-law named Tula and stepmother-in-law by presenting the latter with the chopped-off head, hands, and legs of the former along with a tin of Tula's blood. The crime, however, was treachery on the part of the stepmother who sent her own daughter Tula as the

King's wife by replacing her step-daughter Teja with Tula. By casting a spell on Teja and converting her into a house-sparrow, Tula's mother was successful in her attempt to make her daughter the 'queen' even if only temporarily. However, the consequence was horrendous as Tula was brutally murdered by the king, and the mother was made to eat the flesh and blood of her own daughter as evident from the song of the King's delivery men, "Kin was cooked, kin was served, kin was eaten by kin/Kin's blood lit up the lamps, the whole place cursed be" (Barua 32). Now, such a graphic description of gendered violence undoubtedly unsettles one's notion of fairy tales as culturally innocent. What needs to be asked at this point is, do we need to perpetuate such stories with such dark, violent images to our children in the name of 'didactics' or 'moral correctives'? Bezbaroa admits in his *Preface* to *Burhi Aair Sadhu* that the tales included in the anthology had undergone editorial intervention. Acknowledging the informants, Bezbaroa says:

> the tales were compared, made additions and alterations in them (sic), and then selected after careful perusal. In reality, it may be mentioned that the language in which they wrote the tales to us is literally not there. One may incidentally come across an original sentence or two in certain tales. Some of the tales of course are completely ours. Be it whatever it is, we are grateful to them for their help (P Barua 5).

It is interesting to note that despite editorial intervention, violent grotesque images which must certainly shock the sensibilities of young children are very much a part of *Burhi Aair Sadhu*. Which parts of a work are then, censored, and which parts are acceptable? What is the rationale behind the whole selection process? Why are certain forms of social inequalities such as gender, class, or caste violence easily acceptable or found unproblematic, whereas certain themes of 'coercion' or 'incest' are camouflaged in the tales intended for children? The answer is very well provided by Christa Kamenetsky who accentuates Maria Tatar's observation on

the editorial practices followed by compilers of folktales in her article “Folktales and Traditional Modernity”. As Kamenetsky says:

> Individual folktale collectors supposedly also rewrote folktales in accordance with prevailing social and educational concepts, as well as their personal likes or dislikes, thereby not only eliminating coarse, bawdy, erotic, and incestuous scenes to protect children, according to Tatar, but also emphasizing acts of cruelty, violence, brutal intimidation, bigotry, and coercion, mainly to utilize the tales as "lessons" (200).

Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s *Burhi Aair Sadhu* was more of a patriotic enterprise, and he also must have given due preference to those stories held sacrosanct by the Assamese society of his times. Chandrica Barua notes in her re-tellings of Bezbaroa’s stories entitled, *Stories by the Fire on a Winter Evening* how Bezbaroa preferred the feminine - the symbol of Assamese cultural nationalism in his patriotic endeavor, “Bezbaroa co-opted women to valorize a distinct Assamese cultural and national identity. In a nationalistic agenda, the feminine was the embodiment of virtues like religiosity, submission and self-sacrifice, and any deviation is an aberration" (7). Thus, any aberration leads to cruel punishments and retribution as represented in the folk world of the narrative. The jealous wives in *Silonir Jiyakor Sadhu* (The Kite’s Daughter), *Mekurir Jiyakor Sadhu* (The Cat’s Daughter) are unruly women who need to be punished and subdued through extreme forms of violence such as making them walk on a rope and letting them fall in a pit full of nails and thorns. Chopping the nose of a deviant wife and/or thrashing her to death, often depicted graphically, is the most common way of punishing 'miscreant' wives by husbands often involved in polygamous relationships. The graphic depiction of gendered violence justifies and intensifies the already existing gender biases in the socio-cultural milieu of the Assamese society. Bezbaroa, a product of his age must have found it perfectly unproblematic to depict this form of violent punishment associated with female disobedience, selfishness, greed, etc. This is very much evident from his views on women as

noted in his non-fiction book for children titled *Kamot Krititto Lovibor Xongket* (A Treatise on Being Successful in Work). Telling his readers to be cautious while choosing a partner for marriage, Bezbaroa warns young boys that, "a wife who is angry, unchaste, selfish and irreligious is likely to destroy the peaceful house of her husband and goddess Lakshmi" (*Bezbaroar Rochonawali* 152). Bezbaroa's choice of retaining the violent images of women in the folk and fairy tales is therefore driven by his idea about the 'ideal' woman of his times. Interestingly, the writers who compiled folk and fairy tales in subsequent times also imbibed similar values when it comes to the depiction of gendered violence.

Sarat Chandra Goswami, in his *Asamiya Sadhu Katha* (1929) depicts vividly the violent scene of the accidental killing of an old woman by seven fools in his story titled "*Jongholi Bassa*". The story is believed to be an Assamese parallel to the Kachari tale *The Seven Simpletons* (P.D Goswami). In one instance of the story, the seven foolish servants of a Brahmin were asked to carry their respective bales of harvested paddy crops and unload them wherever the Brahmin's mother told them to do so. On being asked the old lady tells them in vexation, "If you are unable to find a proper place, put it on my head" ("Asamiya Sadhu Kotha" 219). In an instant, the seven fools unload the seven bundles of paddy on her head and return to the paddy field. When the Brahmin learns about their foolishness, he rushes home only to find his mother dead. After the ritual of crying, the Brahmin tells the fools to cremate her by the riverside. As the fools are carrying the women's body, it gets knocked off against some bamboo pole and, consequently, the fools are unable to locate her body. The seven fools, therefore, forcefully take a different lady to the crematory and burn the unknown woman to ashes, substituting her for the missing woman. The Brahmin, on the other hand, discovers his mother hanging from a tree, and, understanding the servants' foolishness, he cremates his mother and later releases the foolish servants. What is interesting in Goswami's story is the fact that violence in the above story does not arise from the traditional conception of

'retribution', rather an 'enactment of violence' is designed in the story to evoke humour. The two old women in the story are not remotely 'transgressive' characters and, the tale is not, to put in the words of Tatar, "story of transgression and punishment or of victimization and retaliation" (Off with their Heads). The story instead takes a slapstick turn with the sole intention of providing entertainment rather than to 'educate or punish' (Tatar) However, what lies behind the curtain of amusement is the pain and suffering inflicted upon the bodies of the two elderly women in the story. While the 'jealous wives' (women) are punished in the most gruesome manner for being seemingly wicked, there appears to be hardly any male character who incurs an equally cruel punishment in the folk and fairy tales. Even the seven servants in Goswami's *Jongholi Bassa* were just asked to leave and they did not receive an appropriate punishment for their heinous crimes. The grisly scene of bodily torture, worthy of censure, has no other function in the story other than to generate a comic effect.

The larger question is: why are such gory scenes of female bodily torture and violence retained in tales meant for little children? Such tales were probably preferred by the editors or compilers for the moral purpose they serve, as a sort of cautionary story (in Bezbaroa's case) or for the comic possibilities it generates (in Goswami's story). The attribution of such cruelty and violence to the step-relatives or to idiotic/simpleton characters such as the seven servants makes it much easier for editors to pass it down to children. However, what cannot be overlooked is the inherent gender bias operative within the very structures even when the tales are read as children's literature. It is interesting to note that the stories emanating from the tribal culture of Assam, where women's position is considered to be to be relatively better than that of women in 'mainstream' Assamese society also portray remarkable incidents of gendered violence. Prafulladutta Goswami's *Parbat Bhoyamar Monorom Sadhu* (1968), a collection of folktales from the Kachari, Jaintia, Khasi, and Naga tribes of then, 'greater Assam' is one of the early accounts of tribal folktales from Assam. Unlike Bezbaroa, however, Goswami's stance

on the collected tales was primarily as a folklorist rather than as an author of children's literature. Goswami, who was more interested in the 'motif-index' of folktales from Assam therefore, did not find it necessary to eliminate stories (for children) with an incestuous theme. For instance, in one of the tales of Kachari origin entitled "*Bijuli aru Maghor Gajoni*" an incestous marriage between a brother and sister, Rowna and Rowni was arranged by the relatives of a certain family. However, Goswami's editorial intervention is visible in the disapproval expressed against such an act by a character in the tale as evident from Rowni's remark in the story, "Sigh! Where in the universe do brothers and sisters get married? If I give my consent for such an outrageous act, the earth will strongly condemn us. I shall, therefore, try all means to avoid this marriage" (Goswami, 768). Eventually, to escape the 'distasteful union' Rowni takes a flight to the sky by giving up her human form and taking the shape of lighting. Rowna, on the other hand, follows her up to the sky in the form of thunder, but can never reach her. Thunder and lighting, according to the belief of the Kacharis are the brother and sister who are close but will never meet. The tale's etiological turn, and, sympathetic gesture towards the female apparently makes it acceptable for children. However, the 'darker' aspects of such a tale throw new light on the gendered relations of domination and control in the familial setting.

The motif of 'cannibalism' is a predominant feature of fairy tales across the globe. Be it "*Tela aru Teja*" from Bezbaroa's *Burhi Aair Sadhu* or "Little Red Riding Hood" from Perrault and the Brothers Grimm', the issue of female cannibalism occupies a pivotal role. When it comes to Prafulladutta Goswami, it is really interesting to note how he chooses to retain this motif of 'cannibalism' in some of his tales and, decides to omit it in some others. For instance, in his collection of tales "*Asom Dexor Sadhu*" (1954), there is a tale entitled, "Teja aru Teji" which is a variant of Bezbaroa's "Tula aru Teja". As stated earlier, Prafulladutta Goswami was primarily a folklorist and he saw the tales more as a cultural repository than as literature which

is individually authored. The similarities, therefore, are quite obvious when it comes to the tales. Strikingly, it is the degree of difference with respect to the plot of the narrative which provides new insights into the 'structural violence' embedded in the text. Coming back to the point, Goswami's "Teja aru Teji" which was meant for children, does not include the gruesome episode of cannibalism found in Bezbaroa's "Tula aru Teja". The horrific scene of 'grotesque serving' in "Tula aru Teja" which also finds expression in Goswami's general collection of folktales meant for a common audience, however, is omitted in his tale meant for children. Interestingly, such cannibalistic images figure in Goswami's later collection of folk tales such as "*Parbat BhoiyamarMonaram Sadhu*" (1968). In one of the Khasi tales entitled "Nuhkalikai Jolpropat" (*Nuhkalikai* Falls) from Goswami's same collection, cannibalism occurs when a step-father feeds the parts of his step-daughter's body to her biological mother named Likai. Enraged and disgusted at the act of unknowingly consuming the organs of her lovely daughter, the mother goes insane and commits suicide by jumping from a very high waterfall. Unlike the story of "Tela aru Teja" where gendered violence is driven by a revenge motif, this particular story moves beyond the ambit of gendered violence to project innocent children being subjected to lethal forms of violence by adults. Owing perhaps to the matrilineal lineage of the Khasi society, the story putatively takes a different turn by attributing 'evilness' to man. The men, as Nandana Dutta rightly says, "are just foolish, not evil" in folktales across cultures (*Mothers Daughters and Others*). However, in the current story, it is the evil step-father in contrast to the evil step-mother who commits the heinous crime of filicide out of sheer jealousy. Goswami, in this regard, is not reluctant to retain a negative image of man. Much like the tale of "Rowna aru Rowni" this tale also firmly sympathizes with the bereaved mother- a fact suggestive of Goswami's translation/retention of the metaphorical title of the story as '*Nuhkalikai Jolproprat*' which literally means 'leap of Ka Likai' from the waterfalls in the Khasi language. Prafulladutta Goswami's decision to retain the violent image in this particular

story must have been engendered by issues of authenticity where he tries hard to project a reliable image of the tribal society to his readers. However, by leaning his narrative towards the socially marginalized characters Goswami offers new perspectives on the 'darker aspects of fairy tales emanating from Assam.

Apart from the depiction of gory and graphic forms of physical violence, there are also tales which project what Galtung (1969) terms as structural and cultural forms of violence. Citing Galtung, Joshua M Price states how structural forms of violence are often "unseen as violence because members of the dominant culture have become habituated to the inequality" (*Structural Violence: Hidden Brutality* 6). Price further notes that:

> deep structural elements of the society mark some people as deserving worse treatment, or even mark some people as less human. The structures responsible for the violence are also responsible for cloaking the violence as violence. Colonialism, racism, and class difference are examples of structures that engender histories of difference, difference marked by violence. Attention to these structures requires attention to the histories. In order to see the violence, one must see the structures (6).

In the light of Price's statement, it can be argued that the folk tales as an important source of history hint at the violence embedded in the structures of the Assamese society. A substantial part of the current thesis has already examined the depiction of various kinds of social inequalities resulting from sexism, able-bodied notions and speciesism. Interestingly, the Indian religious attitude towards the socially marginalized sections such as the woman, the disabled, the disfigured also often result in either direct or indirect violence. Omens play a very important role in the Indian tradition. As Toke Lindegaard Knudsen, an eminent researcher of ancient Hindu astronomy notes, "according to the theory of omens presented by Varahamihira in the *Brhatsamhita*, the misconduct of men causes an accumulation of sin

(papa), from which arises misfortune" ("House Omens in Mesopotamia and India" 122). It is quite interesting to note that most often the socially marginalized ones such as the poor, disabled and/or disfigured are believed to augur inauspiciousness: they are seen as bad omens who bring misfortune to the surroundings. Consequently, such people are most vulnerable to violent reprisals. Lakshminath Bezbaroa, in one of his folk tales titled "Xakhin aaru Xakhini" addresses this issue where an allegedly ill-omened man from a certain village, and another supposedly ill-omened woman from a different village meet in a jungle following their abandonment. Their first verbal encounter reveals that both of them are ostracized by the villagers as they are considered inauspicious. Seeing the lonely woman (*Xakhini*) in the forest, the man (*Xakhina*) asks her:

> Who are you?
>
> I am neither a witch, nor a devil. I am a human with flesh and blood. My villagers have deemed me ill-omened for no reason, and left me in the jungle to die. By the way, who are you?
>
> I am also an unfortune human being just like you. Not any ghost or devil. My misfortune is similar to yours as my villagers, relatives and others have considered me inauspicious, and abandoned me here.
>
> What will happen to us now? Where shall we go?
>
> We won't return to the human community anymore. We are tired of the codes and mores of the human society. Let us build a small hut here and settle down (*Koka Deuta aru Nati Lora* 42).

The conversation between *Xakhina* and *Xakhini* highlights the way the characters are subjected to structural violence, or more particularly, cultural violence which is built into the belief system of the society. As Galtung says, "by cultural violence we mean those aspects of culture,

the symbolic sphere of our existence—exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science—that can be used to justify or legitimate direct or structural violence" (291).

In Bezbaroa's story the ostracization of the two characters *Xakhina* and *Xakhini* is justified through religious and/or ideological beliefs which label certain people as inauspicious or ill-omened. The act of abandoning the two characters is deeply entrenched in the ideological underpinnings of the society which associates human beings as innately good or evil based on their location in society. The anecdotal conversation between the grandfather and the grandson preceding the story of "Xakhina aru Xakhini" sheds light on this issue:

> Grandfather: Why did you chase that old beggar woman from our house today? One should never send beggars empty-handed. Never chase them away. Otherwise, God will be offended.
>
> Grandson: Grandpa, I know that. Therefore, generally I don't chase beggars away. But the other day, I heard in Bormedhi's house that this particular old beggar is an ill-omened woman. She harms people through sorcery. People as well as animals of this village suffer from illness and diseases because of her. After listening to the villagers, I was scared of her, and I was abominated by her presence. That is why I sent her off empty-handed, without offering an ounce of grain.
>
> Grandfather: You have been wrongly taught by someone. Human beings can never be ill-omened. She is very poor, and because of not having access to proper food and shelter she has grown ill. Further, people hurling abuses at her everyday made her uncontrollably irritable. One should always sympathize with such people and help them. From today, you must also love and care for such beggars.
>
> Grandson: Yes, I will grandpa.

> Grandfather: Okay, today I shall narrate you the story of "Xakhina aru Xakhini" (*Koka Deuta aru Nati Lora* 39).

The conversation ostensibly points how cultural ideologies justify structural or direct violence. The fact that the old beggar woman, as narrated by the grandson, is responsible for the mishaps and calamities in the village stems from an understanding that the deformed or disfigured and mostly poor people in society are likely to be considered inauspicious. Apparently, it is linked to the notions of Hindu doctrine of religiosity which perceives such people as innately inauspicious. As Someshwar Sati and G.J.V Prasad state in their Introduction to *Disability in Translation: The Indian Experience*:

> In the Hindu view of life, every birth is a rebirth to live out the causal effects of one's previous lives, to be punished or rewarded in various ways in a form of divine justice. Hence, in all religions, you have to bear your disability, see it as part of a divine cosmology, keep faith and overcome your circumstances by without anger or frustration, simply accepting it as God's will (18).

The beggar woman in Bezbaroa's "Xakhina aru Xakhini" assumedly, is a disfigured woman whose plight is justified through a religious ideology which deems persons such as her as ill-omened. The grandfather's statement that the woman looks sickly or (ugly) because of lack of proper food/nutrition, and her inauspiciousness is not innately connected to her appearance or behavioural traits further elucidates this fact. The grandfather's comment also highlights how poverty is a deadly form of structural violence as Galtung and others persuasively argue. The impoverishment of the beggar woman or the two characters *Xakhini* and *Xakhina* circuitously results from the social arrangements (structures) that deny them basic needs and opportunities. The same poverty leads them to further humiliation, as evident from the story where the two characters were mercilessly carried off to a desolate forest, far away from any human

habitation. The violence embedded in social structures can be discerned in other tales as well such as “Kanchani”, “Silonir Jiyakor Sadhu” by Lakshminath Bezbaroa, “Kumaror Lora” and “Ebegotia” by Troloikyeswari Devi Baruani where the poor are further subjected to lethal forms of violence resulting from unequal power distribution in the socio-cultural sphere.

For instance, in the story of “Kanchani”, a king lustfully desires the beautiful wife of another man. According to the King, the unnamed poor man, does not deserve a beautiful woman as his wife. Therefore, he takes violent means to marry the poor man’s wife. Since the woman is determined to remain loyal to her husband, the king violently murders him, by impaling him on a pole. As *Kanchani* was busy weaving the handloom thread she suddenly sees a crow with a blood-stained beak. On being asked, the crow reveals her that her beak has turned red after drinking the blood of her husband. The story ends on a tragic note where *Kanchani* also sacrifices her life for her husband, and the couple lie in a pool of blood. What is interesting to note in the story is that the lethal violence that the characters have been subjected to often stems from structural violence that establishes a hierarchy between the rich and the poor. Similarly, characters such as *Ebegotia* from Troloikyeswari Devi Baruani’s story by the same name and a whole host of other characters from the repository of folktales from Assam are subjected to either structural or physical violence because of their poor social status. The poor are often demonized, and the ‘other’ in the *Sadhu katha*. However, while different dimensions of violence are represented in the folktales, contemporary retellings aim to accommodate newer understanding of violence through adaptive practices. The next few sections attempt to examine a few cinematic adaptations of folk stories in order to examine negotiations of implicit violence during contemporary times.

Children's Literature and Screen Adaptations

The medium of film, since its very inception, draws heavily from children's literature as filmmakers were attracted to adapting either canonical works of children's literature or stories with their roots in the oral tradition. In fact, the prolific Disney adaptations of fairy tale films have undeniably paved the way for what Zack Zipes (2015) terms a 'cultural tsunami' in the field of adaptation studies. Discussing the significance and history of the genre of fairy tales Zipes argues, "It is impossible to grasp the fairy tale's history and relationship … without considering the basic manner in which they have been adapted, revised, and duplicated either to reinforce or subvert dominant ideologies" (*Fairytale as Myth* 5). Zipes' arguments hint at how adaptive processes engage with the transmission and dissemination, or subversion of certain ideologies to children in particular, and adults in general. Besides that, the modern feminist's engagement with the revisions and appropriation of traditional tales in their attempt to "refuse to obey the authority" has shed new light on the power dynamics of adaptive practices (Bacchilega, 2010). Interestingly, alongside folk and fairy tale films, adaptations of children's texts in general also play a transformative role in the survival, transmission, and even subversion of cultural ideologies. As Bacchilega argues, "adaptations are not simply influenced by their pre-texts, but reflect back on them, coloring our view of them, whether we are familiar or not with every specific pre-text, and intervening on our earlier readings of them – and of other related texts" (*Fairy Tales Transformed?* 31-32). The contemporary adaptation theories are least attentive to questions of fidelity and, adaptations are currently viewed as what Robert Stam calls "a dialogic and intertextual process" (*Fairy tale Films* 3). The application of contemporary adaptation theory (as an ongoing dialogic process) to children's literature, therefore, throws new light on the pedagogical and ideological underpinnings of adaptive practices as it "articulates the complex relations between literary, film, … their young audiences and their cultural and ideological contexts" (*Screen Adaptations* 3). In the light of

the recent developments of adaptation theories as stated above, the next sections of the current chapter, therefore, attempt to see how cinematic adaptations of folklore and children's literature, in general, accommodate newer understandings of violence in the 'retellings' stemming from Assam.

Structural Violence and Postmodern retellings: *Burhi Aair Sadhu* through *Kothanodi*

Almost a century after Bezbaroa's *Burhi Aair Sadhu* was first published (1911), Bhaskar Hazarika re-captures the folk world of these stories in the cinematic medium through his film *Kothanodi* (2015). Bhaskar Hazarika provides a nuanced representation of Assamese culture by inter-weaving four different stories from *Burhi Aair Sadhu* into a composite narrative. On being asked for the reason why he had selected thefour specific stories, Hazarika answer was that the chosen stories: *Tejimola*, *Champawati*, *Oukuwari* and *Tawair Sadhu* had more potential for cinematic representation than the other stories ("Bhaskar Hazarika" *You tube*). Cinema being a live medium "has immense potential for formal innovation" (*Adaptions* 147) and in this regard, it is needless to say that the film *Kothanodi*, through its use of sound, visual richness and other techniques could do immense justice to the depiction of the cultural life of Assam. Like Bezbaroa, Hazarika also attempts to present lived traditional Assamese lives to his audience. As he states in several interviews, he wants people to watch the movie so that they can re-invent the significance of their rich cultural heritage which is gradually diminishing in today's technological world (*News Live Interview*). Through popular Assamese wedding songs, Karbi mourning songs, Mishing Bihu dances, traditional costumes and food, and the recreation of idyllic atmosphere against the backdrop of the river Brahmaputra, Hazarika is successful in evoking the cultural life of Assam in its totality. If Bezbaroa's sole aim was to awaken a feeling of 'nationalism' among his people through his *Burhi Aair Sadhu*, Hazarika, through his *Kothanodi* attempts to revive a cultural interest among the people of 21st century Assam. However, very strikingly Hazarika's treatment of the film is very unusual.

Unlike *Burhi Aair Sadhu* the treatment in *Kothanodi* is not romantic and idyllic; it is instead very dark and macabre. Although violence pervades *Burhi Aair Sadhu* as we have already examined in the first part of the chapter, the tone does not seem to be very dark. In fact, the violent elements are seamlessly interwoven into the narrative rendering it unproblematic to the readers because of its cautionary role of administering discipline and values to children. *Kothanodi*, on the other hand, with its dark eerie atmosphere projected with gory visual effect and ominous sound tract is very different from a children's film. Like most cinematic folklore "which follow audiences from childhood to adulthood" (*Fairy tale Films* 9) Hazarika's film also seems to have been intended for a more mature audience than a child-centric audience. McCullam in this regard rightly notes that "as texts are adapted across different media, their audience can also change" (*Screen Adaptations* 5).

By incorporating significant visual effects with dark and gory scenes Hazarika seems to have returned to "the roots of folklore's darker elements" (*Fairy Tale Films*, 9). As Greenhill and Matrix observe, "these fairy tale readings manifest the resurrection of the sexual, violent, and supernatural elementsof folktale that existed in oral tradition but were censored for children's literature" (*Fairy Tale Films* 9). Hazarika also attempts to resurrect the 'violent elements' of folktales by enhancing the already violent tales, meant for children with more violent and grotesque visuals. While *Burhi Aair Sadhu* with all the violent elements was meant primarily for children, *Kothanodi* is not even considered a children's film by many film reviewers and critics because of the darker elements. Ambar Chatterjee, a reviewer of the film says, "It has to be kept in mind that this is in no way a children's film or a feel-good film for that matter. The film is laced with brutal scenes of torture and subjugation" (Ambar Chatterjee's Reviews). Similarly, Farddina Hussain notes in her article, "Filming Folktales: The Uncanny in Bhaskar Hazarika's *Kothanodi*", "whereas Bezbaroa's folktales have been regarded as bedtime stories for children, viewing of these tales in the film by young children

evokes horror and dismay" (1). By fusing tales that were largely meant and popular among children with darker visuals, Hazarika creates what is called the 'postmodern hybrid'. So, is Bhaskar Hazarika, a product of postmodern sensibilities, trying to re-tell the folk tales through a postmodern lens? If so, what are the techniques employed by Hazarika to reflect anew on the violence embedded in the folk and fairy tales?

Postmodernism is a highly-contested term. As Brian McHale observes, "nothing about postmodernism is uncontroversial. Whether it is a period, a movement, or a general 'condition' of culture, … If there is little consensus about what it is, nevertheless, postmodernism is used as a counter in a variety of contemporary language games, including the language game of narrative theory" (*Routledge Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory* 6). As the above definition suggests, the idea of postmodernism is contested and it is clearly a vast subject. However, from the domain of consciousness to economic and cultural spheres, from art to architecture, postmodernism has been the central subject of debate over the last few decades. Interestingly, postmodern theory, which inspires the theory of 'narrative practice', comes from the field of architecture. Charles Jencks, the postmodern architect, examines the 'intertextual' nature of the postmodernist architectural movement which is very much relevant to the postmodern theories of narratology:

> Post-Modernism is fundamentally the eclectic mixture of any tradition with that of the immediate past: it is both the continuation of Modernism and its transcendence. Its best works are characteristically double-coded and ironic because these heterogeneities most clearly capture our pluralism. Its hybrid style is opposed to the minimalism of late-modern ideology and all revivals which are based on an exclusive dogma or taste (qtd. in *Intertextuality* 186).

Jencks' discussion of the postmodern conception of architecture is very relevant to the discussion of postmodern narrative. The features of 'double-coding', irony, heterogeneity,

plurality, and inter-textuality are dominant features of postmodern narratives. Against the modernist rallying cry of "Make it New", postmodernism attempts to delve into the cultural attic of past devices, styles, genres, and texts, by recycling them in the modes of parody, pastiche, re-contextualization, revision, and rewritings (Brian McHale 201). One such attempt has been made by Bhaskar Hazarika to rewrite the "little narratives" of the local Assamese community through the medium of his "text" *Kothanodi*. Intertextuality, which is one of the prominent devices of postmodern narrative, is deployed by Hazarika in his narrative to give the original text a postmodern effect. Intertextuality suggests that "any text is essentially a mosaic of references to or quotations from other texts; a text is not a closed system and does not exist in isolation. It is always involved in a dialogue with other texts" (Macey 203-204). All adaptations and re-workings are, therefore, intertextual by their very nature since they allude to or incorporate a prior text to suit new situations and meanings. Bhaskar Hazarika is no exception in this regard. By dovetailing four different stories (texts) from the collection of *Burhi Aair Sadhu* to form a new narrative, Hazarika also deploys intertextuality in his narrative.

Interestingly, while integrating intertextuality, Hazarika seems to have returned to “the roots of folklore’s darker elements” (*Fairy Tale Films* 9). As Hazarika states in one of his interviews, “this is my cultural heritage and I can take liberties with it. I like stories that are dark and macabre” (Ramnath 2015 *Trending*). The plot of the narrative with the dark and gory element, and the music reverberating in an eerie setting, makes it a postmodern horror folk narrative. Rather than providing a mere replica or traditional imitation, Hazarika has sought to critically rework the four stories from Bezbaroa’s anthology: *Tejimola*, *Oukunwori*, *Champaboti* and *Tawair Sadhu*. Hazarika subverts each of these stories to some degree giving it a shade of newness, yet paradoxically these stories lay claim to traces of the past which indeed reflect the intertextual practice. For instance, *Tejimola* which was originally a very long story is

condensed to depict the weight of prejudice against women in the Assamese folk tradition. The primary focus of *Champawati*'s story was based on the protagonist *Champawati* and her husband, who was a deity in disguise. However, Hazarika sidelines the original protagonist and concentrates on peripheral characters like *Bonlotika* (Champa's sister) and her mother to depict the structural violence embedded in the folk world of the narrative. Similarly, Hazarika retains the plot line of *Tawair Sadhu* but infuses the narration, with eerie music and gruesome visuals making this particular story very postmodern in its execution. In fact, the film begins with this story in a forest scene where a man buries alive a crying baby. The most striking retelling, however, can be identified in the *Ou Kunwari* (The Elephant Apple Maiden) story which is subverted completely. While the original tale tells the story of a beautiful princess hidden inside an Ou tanga (a fruit) and is finally married to a royal prince, Hazarika's protagonist is ostracized from her community after giving birth to a mysterious Ou tanga. What is interesting to note is that while using intertextuality, Hazarika incorporates violent visuals and haunting special effects in each of the four bedtime stories eventually giving shape to a horror folk narrative.

Hazarika's use of upsettingly haunting signifiers in the film (*Kothanodi*) embodies a strategy of what the Russian formalists term "ostranenie- or defamiliarization"- a technique Hazarika uses to reflect on the familiar social evils. As Christian Bok observes in his article, "Destructive Creation: The Politicization of Violence in the works of Michael Ondatjee":

> Graphic depictions of aestheticized brutality not only attract the prolonged attention of an audience but also shock an audience into a recognition of its own implication in violent, ideological processes. As with any strategy of defamiliarization, however, the unorthodox soon becomes *doxa*, a standard formula of representation that must in turn be dismantled violently: audiences soon become desensitized to shock tactics; consequently, more extreme strategies of defamiliarization are required to challenge reified structures. This "vicious circle" is violent, but not necessarily undesirable: the

> result is an expansion of discursive boundaries. Whatever has suffered violent marginalization because of oppressive ideology is in turn violently centralized (111).

By centralizing violence in his film, Hazarika also attempts to reflect anew on the 'reified structures' of violence in contemporary times. For instance, in the story *Champawati*, the image of *Bonolotika*'s mother as a greedy matriarch (named Lagi in the original tale) is retained by Hazarika. But unlike the original story which centres on the love tale of *Champawati* and her deity prince, Hazarika's story implicitly addresses the superstitious practices which pervade Assamese society even till the present times. *Bonolotika*'s mother attempts to get her daughter married to a python in the hope that it would turn out to be a prince who would shower riches upon their family. Through her, Hazarika foregrounds the dominant superstitious beliefs that exist even in present-day Assamese society, especially in the rural hinterlands. The haunting image of a python swallowing a teenage girl projected through the audio-visual medium makes room for the audience to halt, ponder, and subsequently react to such social evils. Hazarika takes a similar position while dealing with the character of the elephant apple maiden (*Ou Kunwari*). Unlike the original story, where the elephant apple maiden was a princess in disguise, the 'ordinary' woman in Hazarika's story is ostracized since she could not "produce" a human baby, and instead gave birth to an elephant apple. As the woman gives birth to fruit instead of a human baby her angry husband schemes to chase her away from his home. Therefore, he issues her threats that if she should refuse to leave his home, she would be deemed a witch and the villagers would never spare her life. Fearing death, the helpless woman has no other option than to live a secluded life away from her community. Now, by deviating from the happily-ever-after fairy tale of a prince and princess and, focusing on an ordinary woman's affinity with a mysterious fruit, Hazarika is trying to draw our attention to the discursive formulations which legitimize violence emanating from practices such as witch-hunting.

Structural violence, as Marija Todorova notes, "is a comprehensive framework to explain how individuals suffer both physical and psychological deterioration due to poverty, class, racism, gender inequity, and environmental risk, all of which are being maintained by social structures" ("Translating Violence" 250). By deploying intertextuality, conveniently through the violent visuals, Hazarika also exposes the 'reified structures' of violence operated in the 'prior texts' and by doing so he critiques the very social context upon which the narrative is embedded. By incorporating the "prior text" (the original *Burhi Aair Sadhu* in this regard) in his 'text' (*Kothanodi*), Hazarika not only exposes the dominant ideologies of the pre-colonial past but also reflects upon the structural forms of violence in contemporary society such as witch-hunting, child infanticide, superstitions, etc.

Hazarika, through the strategy of defamiliarization, undoubtedly exposes the underpinning ideologies operative within the unequal power structures of the Assamese society. However, the incorporation of horror also accommodates newer ways of negotiating with structural violence that stems from the postmodern setting in which Hazarika operates. For instance, just as in the original tale, Hazarika retains the image of the stereotypical cruel stepmother in his depiction of *Tejimola*'s mother. However, altering certain features of the character Hazarika has perhaps given room to the audience to treat her empathetically. Hazarika depicts *Tejimola*'s mother as a schizophrenic who speaks most of the time through her eyes. By giving her fewer words and more expressions, conveniently through the medium of his film, Hazarika opens up possibilities to explore the story from the point of view of *Tejimola*'s mother. It is seen in the film that in the dead of night she meets her evil self who is a demon, or her split-personality who instigates her to kill *Tejimola*. The underlining fact here is that while in the original tale it was her stepmother's evil plan to get rid of *Tejimola* forever, in the film the evil self of *Tejimola*'s mother, who is personified as a demon plays a pivotal role. In the light of modern theories of psychoanalysis, such kind of depiction, though disconcertingly haunting, entails

post-modern queries as to which 'self" of the mother crushed her step-daughter to death. If it is the evil self, then how would the good self of *Tejimola*'s mother be? Such depiction allows the audience to ponder over deeper issues. Again, in the original story of *Tawair Sadhu* has no voice or presence given to any woman at all. When the man repeatedly buries his three children on his *Tawai*'s (father's friend) advice, it is his own voice that stops him from burying his fourth child. However, in Bhaskar Hazarika's story, it is Malati, the wife of Poonai, who is ready to kill *Tawai* were he instructs her to kill their fourth child. By rendering her the voice and agency to decide for her child, Hazarika has sought to position his narrative within the changing times where a woman does sometimes have a voice of her own. Therefore, it can be seen that Hazarika finds alternative ways of negotiating with patriarchy. By portraying the women as evil, greedy, submissive, and naïve at times, Hazarika is not eradicating their negative attributes in the story, but he is opening up issues to which a subversive audience can react. Hazarika, by drawing upon stereotypes, attempts to question the operative ideologies within the very system. Instead of making an effort to subvert the stereotypes, and instil new stereotypes in place of the old, Hazarika is questioning the underlying ideologies operative within those structures. Hazarika not only not romanticizes Assamese society, he also attempts to expose the imperfections and negativities of Assamese culture. By presenting the darker fragments, the chain of eerie signifiers, and questioning the grand narrative of 'a romanticizing past' Hazarika has, indeed, taken a very postmodern stance.

"'My aunt is not a witch': Re-conceptualizing violence through the child's eye in the film *Ishu*"

Wojik-Andrews in his book *Children's Films: History, Ideology, Pedagogy*, examines the various ways in which the relationship between children and films are explored, "in order to determine how children-defined as pre-adolescents, twelve years of age and under- have been portrayed in the movies, and how these portrayals reflect changing attitudes toward childhood

and the historical trends in general" (42). Films for children thus, remain an integral part of the British and American film industry since the 1950's. So far as India is concerned, the production of children's films, "has been loose, uncoordinated and occasional" (Brown, 2015, 186). Consequently, there is a relative scarcity of cinematic adaptations in the Indian scenario. However, despite the paucity of children's films in the country's largest centre of production popularly known as Bollywood, state-sponsored, non-commercial body of films such as the Children's Film Society of India, (CFSI) has been, quite remarkably, producing children's feature films, documentaries, shorts, and animations in various regional languages since its inception in the mid 1950's. Produced by the Children's Film Society of India, and based on the noted Assamese writer Manikuntala Bhattacharya's children's novel *Ishu*, Utpal Borpuzari's film of the same name sheds new light on gendered violence through adaptive practice by focusing on the child's perspective of violence. The film offers fresh perspectives on gendered violence by looking at the demonic practice of 'witch hunting' through the eyes of an innocent ten-year-old child, Ishwar. As Utpal Borpuzari, the director of *Ishu* says in an interview, "When I read the novel *Ishu*, I was struck by the way it looked at the malaise of witch-hunting through the eyes of a child. We often don't realize the impact of such incidents – and the violence that comes with them – on children. I decided to adapt it and thought of looking at it from a child's perspective." (Barua). Borpuzari's statement is crucial in understanding his choice of the literary text. Unlike Hazarika, Borpuzari's adaptation is not a retelling or revision of a particular text, but his film is more or less 'equivalent' to the original novel in terms of its content. Borpuzari, a film critic-turned director is aware of the role of adaptations in not only transmitting and reproducing but also in exposing certain cultural ideologies. The director, therefore, feels the urgent need to draw the audience's attention to the cultural and social evils, which he reveals with greater specificity through the medium of his film. Considering, the potential of children's films in handling a highly sensitive issue such as

witch-hunting, Borpuzari argues, "despite its sensitive and serious backdrop my film treats the subject in a way that is suitable for viewing by children" (The Assam Tribune). Set in a remote tribal Rabha village named Karipara, *Ishu* projects the everyday events of the innocent child protagonist of the same name until his life is turned upside-down following a series of violent actions against his favourite aunt who is branded as a witch.

Ishu, who takes pleasure in the simple joys of life such as cuddling his favourite pet, bunking his mathematics class to swim in the *Sipna* river, singing, playing, listening to stories, etc. is baffled to see his elders quarrel over a fence which, according to him is a petty issue. An apple of everyone's eye, Ishu, loves being pampered by his favourite aunt, Ambika, who narrates him stories, makes *pitha* for him, and takes him along with her to the wild forest to collect herbs and leaves. Brought up in an ambience of love and carefree joy, Ishu is unaware of the meaning of violence till the point of time when his Ambika aunt is declared a witch by a quack doctor. When his mother gives birth to his baby sibling, one of his aunts, Bhadreswari, taunts Ishu by asking him if he is jealous of his newborn baby sister. Interestingly, the Assamese synonym for jealousy is *hingsa* which also means violence. Perplexed by his aunt, Bhadreswari's question Ishu asks his sister-in-law:

> What is *hingsa*?
>
> *Hingsa* means… say you do not like your mother bringing a younger sister or brother for you. Say… if I hide your pencils for your competence in mathematics.
>
> Yesterday they were fighting over a fence, is it *hingsa*?
>
> Hmmn… not quite. Of course, jealousy (*hingsa*) might lead to such fights *(Ishu)*.

The conversation between Ishu and his educated sister-in-law Radha is crucial in understanding how jealousy might lead to violence- the thematic crux of the film. It is because of jealousy, that the village *Bej* (quack) and Bhadreswari conspire against Ambika, and set into circulation

a spurious discourse of witchcraft to drive her off the village. Discourse, as understood in Foucauldian terms, is the production of knowledge through language by those in power. As Foucault argues, “each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (Foucault, in Rabinow 1991). In the context of *Ishu*, the ‘truth’ of Ambika as a *daini* (witch) is also constituted through a certain set of discourses. In one of the early scenes of the film, Ishu and his friends meet the *bej* on their way to school who tells them about a dream symbolizing the arrival of a witch in the village. “Do you know your Bhadreswari *Jethi* has seen the arrival of a *daini* in dreams? She saw a ferocious witch coming from the western direction. The witch is planning to do some deadly stuff in the village. Let me go and interpret Bhadreswari’s dream” (*Ishu*). The interpretation of Bhadreswari’s dream is a vital factor in shaping the discourse of Ambika as a witch. Debarshi Prasad Nath argues that, "in almost all the cases of witch-hunting that have been reported in the print and electronic media of Assam, it is obvious that single women or old couples with land are at a relatively higher risk of being labelled witches" (“Assam’s Tale of Witch-hunting” 57). Ethnographic studies also claim that witch-hunting is motivated most often by conflicts over land and power. In the film *Ishu,* Ambika is portrayed as a widow whose possession of a plot of land, and her growing popularity as an herbalist pose a threat to the patriarchal schemes in general, and the village *bej* (quack) in particular. While Bhadreswari eyes Ambika’s property, the *Bej* is quite apprehensive about the traditional 'knowledge' of female healers like Ambika. In order to discredit her ‘knowledge’, the *Bej*, together with Bhadreswari connects Ambika’s knowledge of herbs with diabolic powers and, labels her a witch. The above instance highlights how witch-hunting is a gendered phenomenon and it also ascertains the need to situate such evil practices in the larger socio-economic discursive fabric in which it is embedded.

The filmmaker, Utpal Borpuzari highlights the poor socio-economic condition of the villagers in which such discursive formulations get entrenched. As Parthajit Barua notes, "in *Ishu*, the filmmaker presents the reality of the peripheral people being neglected by the government. For instance, in one scene a dilapidated building, with a worn-out board of 'health centre' in Karipara village is shown which connotes the utter negligence of the health department". The poor infrastructure and the portrayal of absent teachers in the school reflect the interiorscape of the village. Similarly, the lack of proper health and educational facilities makes room for the superstitious villagers to blame evil 'witches' for any kind of unexplained diseases, and/or natural calamities. In the film, *Ishu*, the untimely death of Ishu's two newborn siblings and the mysterious death of a villager named Jatin is attributed to Ambika's diabolic powers, and the two incidents subsequently validate the discourse of witch-hunting. Consequently, the climax occurs in a scene where the village *bej* authoritatively proclaims Ambika as a daini, and the villagers in a state of mass frenzy burn Ambika's house, beat her almost to death, and drive her out of the village. Watching his favourite aunt, Ambika being beaten, dragged, thrashed, and tied to a tree, a disturbed Ishu runs from the place and tells the pet dog, "My aunt is not a witch! Go and bite those people who have branded her a witch" (*Ishu*) Utpal Borpuzari was particularly interested in portraying the psychological impact of such evil practices on children. As the CEO of Children's Film Society of India comments, "The movie is informative, educative and throws light on the harmful effects of social evils practiced by people in the society. The movie tells the audience that such evils harm children and hurt their psychology" ("All about Utpal Borpuzari's"). Utpal Borpuzari, however, does not let his child-protagonist get psychologically drained because of the violent incident. Instead of depicting the child Ishu as a mute spectator to the unbridled violence, the filmmaker gives him a voice and makes him question the whole discourse of witch-hunting. The events following Ambika's disappearance from the village concentrate on Ishu's triumphant act of

saving his aunt from the clutches of death and re-instating her position and autonomy in the village. With the help of a few sensible adults, the child-protagonist heroically succeeds in saving his aunt, finally leading to the arrest of the villainous quack and Bhadreswari. The film ends on a fairy-tale note with the triumph of good over evil – a prerequisite for children's films that serve a didactic purpose. However, *Ishu* does much more than getting the wrongdoers punished for their villainous wrongdoings. By giving agency, voice and action to the child-protagonist Ishu, who questions, challenges, and ultimately redeems his aunt, the narrative exposes the cultural locations of gendered violence through the voice of the child-protagonist. Utpal Borpuzari, in this regard, reconceptualizes violence by drawing fresh insights on the discursivity of epistemic violence by taking a poststructuralist stance.

According to Dion Sommer et al, children's perspective represents "children's experiences, perceptions, and understanding in their life world. …the focus here is on the child as subject in his or her own world, the child's own phenomenology" (*Child Perspectives* 23). The restricted worldview of a child, with his/her limited experience and knowledge can be a potential tool in interrogating and unpacking the hidden ideologies in a narrative. A child's honest and naive viewpoint allows filmmakers to handle sensitive issues such as witch-hunting from an unbiased perspective. By presenting the events from Ishu's perspective, the filmmaker, Utpal Borpuzari quite convincingly questions the reliability of the discourse of witch-hunting. However, in doing so, Borpuzari adopts a post-structuralist stance, as argued above. In an instance, after Ambika is driven out of the village, a troubled Ishu asks a very crucial question to his grandmother:

> What exactly is a *daini* (witch)?
>
> Evil spirits that take the shape of human beings.
>
> In that case, the *Bej* can also be a witch? Isn't it?

> Ishu…
>
> Why? All of you can label my aunt as a witch, and, if I say the *Bej* can also be a witch, I am bad. You adults are all alike (*Ishu*).

The above remark by Ishu marks the culmination in de-centering the whole discourse of witch-hunting. Ishu further raises a very significant question: "how will I know if all the people in the village become witches"? (*Ishu*). The question is crucial not only to the child-protagonist Ishu, but it is significant in exposing the larger ideological context in which the narrative gets embedded. A young Ishu whose pre-conceived notions about a *daini* (witch) is a figure with long nails, rough long hair, and red eyes cannot come to terms with the fact that his loving aunt can be a witch. Ishu's statement is analytical and is therefore, an adequate response to the epistemic violence which is exerted through the discourse of witch-hunting. By alerting his grandmother's and the audience's attention in general to the fact that the *bej*'s (quack) declaration (of his aunt being a witch) cannot be the ultimate word, *Ishu* advocates the poststructuralist emphasis on recognizing alternative discourses. As Pramod K Nayar states, "poststructuralism's emphasis on destabilizing centres argues that whatever we have accepted as conventions, as traditions, as norms are the result of a system of practices of power of linguistic and representational strategies" (Mitra). In the film *Ishu*, the quack's formulation of the 'idea' that, "she is not a normal human-being- she is a witch. She will turn the entire village into a cremation ground" (*Ishu*) exerts epistemic violence as it effectively silences the voice of the victim, Ambika to the periphery in the discourse. However, the filmmaker's attempt to question such 'ideas' through the voice of Ishu and a few other sensible characters problematizes the 'truth' of Ambika as a witch as it sees such realities as socially constructed. For example, on the very night when Ambika was violently tortured and persecuted by the villagers, Bhadreswari's daughter-in-law visits Ishu's mother and tells her that, "today Ambika *khuri* (aunt) is branded as a witch, tomorrow if the *Bej* wishes, he will brand any woman as a

witch. He is taking advantage of our ignorance" (*Ishu*). Her statement '*dainibonabo*' or the 'making of a witch' sheds new light on the discursivity of witch-hunting. Like Ishu, the educated Radha also questions what counts as knowledge. Radha's remark aligns with the poststructuralist feminist's worldview "that seeks to deconstruct, debunk, and dismantle the positivist belief in scientific objectivity and the commonly accepted assumptions of a masculinist culture" ("Poststructural Feminist" 37). The filmmaker, Utpal Borpuzari, through the narrative of *Ishu*, therefore, deconstructs the gendered discourse of witch-hunting. Simultaneously, he also attempts to reconceptualize the notion of violence by locating the epistemic and discursive forms of violence in the narrative, and highlighting how epistemic violence further leads to physical forms of violence.

Conclusion

Despite contentious debates over the appropriateness of violent content for young readers, violence remains an integral part of children's literature. So far as children's literature from Assam is concerned, it presents little exception. Beginning with the folktales compiled by Bezbaroa and Prafulladutta Goswami in the early twentieth century to the postmodern retellings and post-structural adaptations of children's literature in the twenty-first century, darker elements are seen enmeshed in children's literature emanating from Assam. However, the portrayal of violence in different children's texts holds different socio-cultural and ideological ramifications. By examining violence in Bezbaroa's *Burhi Aair Sadhu* the analysis in this chapter attempts to extract the 'hard facts of the fairy tales' emanating from the socio-cultural bias of pre-colonial Assam. Prafulladutta Goswami's scenes of violence highlight the sympathizing tone of the author against the backdrop of the evolving cultural milieu. Bhaskar Hazarika, a product of a postmodern setting, examines a newer understanding of the structural violence stemming from unequal power structures of contemporary society through a postmodern lens. And, Utpal Borpuzari draws the readers' attention to a very rampant form of

violence in Assam emanating from social practices such as witch-hunting through, the eyes of a child protagonist.

NOTES

[1.] The Assamese word *hingsa* means spite or violence. Another meaning of the word is jealousy.

[2.] *Kachari*s or Bodos, *Jaintia*, *Khasi* and *Naga* are some of the ethnic groups of Northeast India. The *Kacharis* of Assam belong to the Tibeto-Burman group of the Indo-Chinese race. The *Jaintia* or the *Pnar* people are natives of West Jaintia Hills and East Jaintia hills of present-day Meghalaya, India. They belong to the Austro-Asiatic language family. The *Khasis* inhabit the districts of East Meghalaya, India. *Naga* is an umbrella term for a number of ethnic groups residing in the Indian state of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and also parts of Burma.

[3.] *Brhat-samhita* is a 6th century Sanskrit-language encyclopedia compiled by Varahamihira in present-day Ujjain, India.

[4.] *Xakhini* can be translated as an ill-omened woman. Bezbaroa uses term *Xakhina* to refer to an ill-omened man in his tale.

[5.] The word *Jethi* or *Jethai* means elder sister of one's father or mother in Assamese.

[6.] The word *daini* means a witch who practices black magic in Assamese.

[7.] The word *bej* means a quack that practices traditional means to cure diseases.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

"You are reading too much onto it" … "It's just a children's story" … "don't ruin it for me". Fiona McCulloch, a distinguished critic of children's literature argues how these kinds of defensive attitudes are interjected against critically engaging with children's literature. McCulloch further argues how such 'defensive attitudes' emanate from a shared nostalgic element associated with reading practices of children's literature in particular:

> Undoubtedly children's books do ignite a nostalgic element not unlike a comfort blanket to buffer us against the world's storms, and we remember cosying up with a good book as part of our childhood memory. To invade that sacrosanct space then becomes a kind of trespass against a shared cultural nostalgia whose gatekeepers baulk at such sheer insolence. … ("Theorizing Scottish Children's").

This study was undertaken to understand the socio-cultural and political factors which eventually led to the formation of a distinct body of children's literature in Assam- literature that triggers a sentiment of a 'shared cultural nostalgia' in due course of time. The second reason for undertaking the study was, however, connected to the first one, and, was drawn from a pedagogical impulse. Considering the established body of children's literature as a cultural heritage of Assam or a grand narrative of a romanticizing past, which parts of the narrative need to be told to children? And, what cultural influences need to be highlighted? With these queries in mind, a scholarly endeavor of an overlooked, under-theorized children's body of literature emanating from the Indian state of Assam was undertaken.

Peter Hunt in his book *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism*, maintains that "one of the most useful insights of modern criticism has been that no work, even the most apparently simple book for children, can be innocent of some ideological freight" (18).

Roderick MGillis echoes a similar conviction by insisting that "many books for young are disarming, nevertheless, the possibilities for interpretation of this literature are as varied as they are for any literature…theory has taught us that what appears simple does so because we have not looked closely enough at that simple thing" ("Criticism is the theory of Literature" 14). With a view to 'look closely' at a body of literature fraught with ideological implications, a critical approach to children's literature in Assam was necessitated in the study. A closer analysis of the study reveals that children's literature in Assam is also "replete with depth, breadth, imagination" and most importantly "a capacity to question" as McCulloch persuasively argues. Like any other literature, children's literature in Assam is also ambivalent insofar as the very texts which hold oppressive ideologies also have the potential to challenge the status quo through their subversive elements. As Reynolds Kimberley observes:

> children's literature provides a curious and paradoxical cultural space: a space that is simultaneously highly regulated and overlooked, orthodox and radical, didactic and subversive. It is a space ostensibly for children – and certainly, in the fictions created for them, children encounter ideas, images, and vocabularies that help them think and ask questions about the world– but children's literature has also provided a space in which writers, illustrators, printers, and publishers have piloted ideas, experimented with voices, formats, and media, played with conventions, and contested thinking about cultural norms (*Radical Children's Literature* 3).

A scholarly endeavor of this sort highlights the fact that while many of the texts for young readers in Assam are entwined with stereotypical images, the same texts also offer alternative ways of refuting the same. The works of the writers who are considered the architects of children's literature in Assam such as Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Atul Chandra Hazarika, Navakanta Barua, Prafulladutta Goswami, Sarat Chandra Goswami, Troloikyeswari Devi Baruani were chosen for undertaking the study since their works embody shared cultural

values, and offer a fertile terrain for intellectual rigor so far as the objective of the study is concerned. A small section of the study also focused on contemporary retellings of children's literature intending to see how contemporary adaptive practices accommodate newer understanding of the old 'cultural values.'

This chapter attempts a brief sketch of the observations and deductions emerging from the study. It offers a summary of the main findings of the chapters of the study and also posits suggestions for further research in the arena of children's literature from the North Eastern part of India.

Chapter 2 of the study undertakes a comprehensive history of the genre of children's literature in the West, and in India with a specific focus on Assam. It was felt necessary to trace the genealogy of what gradually evolved as a distinct body of children's literature in Assam and, therefore, the study begins by making a foray into the very region where children's literature as a genre had its roots: the West. The study finds that children's literature in the West as a separate category of literature emerged only in eighteenth-century England beginning with John Newberry's landmark publication of a book for children titled "A Little Pretty Pocket Book" (1744). The changing perceptions of childhood, the educational doctrines of Locke and Rosseau, and, a whole host of socio-cultural factors necessitated a demand for books exclusively for children. Newberry provided the much-needed technological breakthrough by setting up his publishing business, following which the real battle between 'instruction and delight' pervaded the cultural and literary scene. Once begun, children's literature flourished like an endless stream marking the Victorian age as the golden age of children's literature. The study finds that in contemporary times children's literature in the West has reached a stage where it has come to represent a 'universal symbol of childhood.' It was at this point the study felt it crucial to re-orient the locus Eastwards and trace the history of children's literature in India, particularly Assam.

The history of children's literature in India is inseparable from the colonial history of the country. Although the rich oral storytelling tradition with folk and fairy tales has always enthralled young children in India, as also adults, the socio-political factors of colonialism had paved the way for the growth and development of a distinct body of children's literature in different languages across the nation, including Assam. As K. A Jamuna notes in the *Preface* of her edited book, *Children's Literature in Indian Languages*, "conscious eff orts to develop children's literature in different languages of our country began sometime towards the end of the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth century. Our contact with the West encouraged Indian writers to produce literature for children on scientific lines" (6). To understand how the cultural forces in colonial Assam eventually helped in the production of 'children's literature on scientific lines', the chapter pays particular attention to the historical context in which literature for the young gradually evolved in Assam. The study finds that children's literature in Assam was very much an ideological contribution towards dismantling the hegemonic forces of not only the British colonizers but also putatively, of another native group: the Bengalis. The inevitable outcome of British colonialism in Assam was primarily the perceived and putative loss of a distinct language and cultural ethos of the land, as the region of Assam was subsumed within the larger Bengal province soon after the colonial conquest. The historical trauma of colonialism eventually gave rise to a sentiment of cultural nationalism which was particularly registered in the literature for children. Children's literature, in this regard, served as a discursive entity to inculcate a sense of a distinct cultural identity in the wake of envisioning a distinct Assamese nation.

Given the by-now-established fact that children's literature in Assam was formed against the backdrop of cultural nationalism in colonial Assam, there lie some inherent dangers in perpetuating such a body of literature for the children, who are the future citizens-to-be: such literature carries the possible risks of disseminating the stereotypical ideologies along with the

so-called 'cultural values'. The next three chapters, chapter 3, chapter 4, and chapter 5 engage in a critical dialogue with current theoretical scholarship in order to locate the ideologies of ableism, speciesism, sexism, and other darker aspects entwined in the texts for children.

Amanda Leduc makes a thought-provoking argument in her book *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability and Making Space*:

> Disabled people, along with other marginalized groups, have long borne the brunt of disenfranchisement in storytelling… these narratives run so much deeper than we realize. Like the thorns that grew to submerge Sleeping Beauty's castle in the Disney film, their roots run gnarled paths far below the ground. To understand how the medical and social models of disability function in the world of our every day, and how these models and ways of thinking shape the words that guide countries on a social, political, and structural level, we must also understand how the stories that we've told in the past have worked to entrench the idea of the disabled *other* as - at best -an object of pity, and at worst an invisible someone, barely there at all (39).

Intending to understand how stories have functioned to 'entrench the idea of the disabled' in the cultural context of Assam, Chapter 3 of the study explores issues of disability in the folk and fairy tales of Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Troloikyeswari Devi Baruani- two of the early compilers of folktales from Assam. Upon examination, the chapter finds that the folk and fairy tales of Assam are replete with ableist ideology- an ideology that gives due preference to able-bodiedness as opposed to those who are 'disabled'. Borrowing theoretical inputs from the critics of the cultural model of disability such as Erving Hoffman, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Ato Quayson among a few others, and also drawing on the Indian religious attitudes to disability, the study finds that bodily deviance or difference is constructed as an aspect of disability in the folk world of the narratives. Beginning from *Ou Kunwori* to *Kona*, *Kuja* and

Ebegotia, the perceived physical/mental impairment of the characters of the folk and fairy tales of Assam leads to their marginalization and ostracization from society. The study interestingly finds that it is not just physical and cognitive ailment that disables a character, but even 'ugliness' and 'obesity' can be seen as disabling aspects as demonstrated through the story of "Bandori" and "Chawalpuria". Remarkably, the study also finds that certain folk and fairy tales have subversive undertones where the character's perceived disability serves as a transformative agency to overcome their corporeal, cognitive and stigmatized otherness. For instance, characters such as *Ebegotia*, *Ramdhan*, and a few others transcend the barriers of cultural and social stigma through their quick wit and repartee.

So far as the question of gender and disability is concerned, the study finds that there is a profound degree of difference between the discrimination of a disabled woman with that of a disabled man, as demonstrated in the tales chosen for the study. The representations testify to the fact that while the disabled man does have some sense of agency, and the potential to emerge victorious at times, the suffering of a disabled woman is more intense as she undergoes the double marginalization of sex and disability- an issue often overlooked by 'mainstream' feminists. The chapter also explores the idea of gender and disability by focusing on Baruani's lived experience of disability. What can be presumed from the analysis is that Baruani's diabetic condition, which is seen as a disabling aspect in the study, is alleviated to some extent by her act of editorial prostheticizing -the act of editing tales not only in the general sense but also in the disability-related changes the author makes to the individual tales. While making necessary amendments to the tales in relation to her own lived experience of disability, Baruani empathetically gives voices to the otherwise voiceless disabled female characters in the tales.

Chapter 4 of the study deals with the concept of animality in the fantasy literature of Assam such as folktales and fantasy novellas. The texts selected for this chapter are; a folktale titled "Ejoni Malini aruEjupa Phool" which is equally popular among the children of 'mainstream'

Assamese and tribal communities of Assam, a children's fantasy novella titled *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur* by Navakanta Barua, and, another fantasy novella entitled *Nila Chorai* by Atul Chandra Hazarika which is translated from the Belgian play "The Blue Bird" by Maurice Materlinck.

Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel writes in his *Foreword* to the book *Colonialism and Animality*: *Anti-Colonial Perspectives in Critical Animal Studies*:

> the colonial project—encompassing diverse rationalities of elimination, exploitation, and assimilation—cannot be easily disentangled from our prevailing relationships with animals. In part, this reflects the material reality that colonialism was also accompanied by the radical remaking of non-human animals and nature…Colonialism also participated in the conversion of almost all non-human life into objects for capitalist accumulation, transforming pre-existing human-animal relations, and altering food production and consumption (xvii).

In a similar vein, colonialism not only changed the political and social demography of the Assam province but also brought about an unprecedented change in the ecological landscape of the region. The massive deforestation caused by the tea plantations, the clearing of jungles and wastelands, and the exploitation of natural resources in the name of technological progressiveness, all of these factors eventually widened the gulf between the human and the non-human environment. It is against such a backdrop that the chapter undertakes a study of animality in the twentieth-century children's literature from Assam, deploying critical inputs from animality studies and critical posthumanism. A closer observation reveals that in the wake of the new century, anthropomorphism was used by certain writers like Lakshminath Bezbaroa as an educational tool to espouse values and virtues to children. Set in the tradition of fables such as the Panchatantra and Aesop's Fables, Bezbaroa's collection of short stories for

children, entitled *Junuka* was a powerful means of voicing educational concern through the tool of anthropomorphism. The fable of the *Teliasarang aru Fesu* (The Stork and the Owl), *Rajhah aru Kauri* (The Swan and the Crow) among many others have certain educative values that children are expected to emulate.

The study also finds that while writers such as Bezbaroa were echoing human concerns through the voice of the animals, animals find agency and subjectivity not only in the folktales but also in the works of certain writers such as Navakanta Barua and Atul Chandra Hazarika. From the analyses of a popular folk poem "Ejoni Malini aruEjupa Phool" it is found that plants such as the tree in the poem, animals (cow), humans such as the herder, cook, woodcutter, and blacksmith, amphibians (the frog), abiotic factors (human activities) and biotic forces (clouds), all share an impartial and ecologically balanced relationship based on the premise of 'interspecies communication' in the folk world of the poem. Such an analysis sheds light on the "non-coercive relationships between cultures and societies" (*Colonialism and Animal*ity xix) in the pre-colonial world. By focusing on the works of Navakanta Barua and Atul Chandra Hazarika, the discussion in the chapter suggests that writers combat speciesist ideologies and destabilize anthropocentrism through their works meant for children by addressing issues of subjectivity and identity around the site of the animal. Barua combats speciesism by deploying a nonsense but subversive logic through his fantasy novella *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur* where the central child-protagonist, Joon, encounters animals, and other non-human entities who challenge his perceived human supremacy through various means. Similarly, Hazarika combats the speciesist hierarchy by presenting an interconnected worldview- an inclusive awareness where the boundaries between humans, non-human animals, and inanimate entities are in a state of constant flux in his fantasy novella *Nila Chorai*.

Chapter 5 of the study examines violence in children's literature and its retellings from Assam. The chapter particularly looks at the folk and fairy tales of Lakshminath Bezbaroa,

Sarat Chandra Goswami, and Prafulladutta Goswami to explore the 'darker elements' embedded in the tales.

The representation of violence in children's literature dates back to the folk and fairy tales of the oral traditions across cultures. As Marija Todorova observes:

> Images of physical violence have been present for a long time in folklore and the fairy-tale tradition. Violence can be seen as an essential element of children's literature from ancient Greece to the Middle Ages. Throughout the centuries, physical violence has been used as a didactic element in 'stories in which the virtuous were rewarded and evildoers suffered retribution'. If we look at the fairy tales of Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, for instance, we are reminded that violence, as it is understood today, had in fact been a very common part of childhood and stories told to children long ago and in many places in the world (*The Translation of Violence in Children's Literature* 12).

As in many places in the world violence is also an integral part of children's literature, particularly in folk and fairy tales of Assam. It is with this conviction that the chapter undertakes a study of violence in the selected tales from Assam. Upon examining the representation of violence in folk and fairy tales of Assam, the study finds that actions of violence as portrayed in the tales, are directed towards most often, if not always, to persons from the socially marginalized sections. This calls attention to unearthing the 'unwarranted power structure' that inducts children into a system in which they are targets and perpetrators of violence as Mavis Reimer convincingly argues. By examining the issue in the light of editorial intervention and self-censorship by Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Prafulladutta Goswami, the study finds that the violent and darker elements are entrenched in the tales, reflecting the social and moral codes of the Assamese society in the pre-colonial times. From

SilonirJiyakor Sadhu, to *Mekurir Jiyekor Sadhu*, *Tula aru Teja* to *Jangholi Bassa*, the study deduces how the graphic depiction of gendered violence justifies and intensifies the already existing gender biases in the socio-cultural milieu of the Assamese society.

According to Marija Todorova, "children's books can either uphold the dominant discourse of stereotypical images or challenge these stereotypes and create new contemporary images" (*The Translation of Violence* 3). To see whether the contemporary retellings of children's literature have upheld the dominant 'stereotypical images' or contested the same, a section of the chapter analyses two contemporary films associated with children- *Kothanodi* by Bhaskar Hazarika, and *Ishu* by Utpal Borpuzari in the light of postmodern and poststructuralist theories. The study finds that while violence in children's literature was purportedly perpetuated through the means of 'epistemic violence', in the folk and fairy tales it also performed a kind of 'strategic counter-violence' through contemporary adaptive practices. The study interestingly finds that Bhaskar Hazarika, by deploying one of the important postmodern features of intertextuality, through means of macabre and violent visuals, exposes the 'reified structures' of violence which operated in the 'prior texts'. Hazarika is able to critique the very social context upon which the narrative is embedded through this strategy. By incorporating the "prior text" (the original *Burhi Aair Sadhu* in this regard) in his 'text' (*Kothanodi*), the study finds that Hazarika not only exposes the dominant ideologies of the pre-colonial past but also reflects upon the structural forms of violence such as witch-hunting, child infanticide and superstitions in contemporary society of the present.

Apart from Bhaskar Hazarika's *Kothanodi*, the chapter also examines the film *Ishu*, which is produced by the Children's Film Society of India and is based on the noted Assamese writer Manikuntala Bhattacharya's children's novel by the same name. The chapter finds that Utpal Borpuzari's film, *Ishu* sheds new light on gendered violence through adaptive practice by focusing on the child's perspective of violence. By presenting the events from the child-

protagonist Ishu's perspective, the filmmaker, Utpal Borpuzari quite convincingly questions social mores and ethics that condone practices such as witch hunting in the film. It is also found in the study that Borpuzari, reconceptualizes the notion of violence by locating the epistemic and discursive forms of violence in the narrative, and by highlighting how epistemic violence leads to physical forms of violence.

The next part of the chapter examines the limitations of the study and posits new directions of study in the area of children's literature in Assam.

This study has primarily examined children's literature in Assam from a particular historical period in time- the colonial era ranging from the late nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century. Secondly, the study has focused largely on the genre of fantasy literature for children, a substantial section of which are folk and fairy tales published for children. It was, therefore, beyond the ambit of this study to include other possible texts from a different timeline or different genres. The study then, posits possible research in the same period, with similar concerns but in different genres such as realistic stories/novels for children, best exemplified in the works of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Benudhar Rajkhowa, among a few others. Scholarly interest in children's literature in India is a recent phenomenon and undoubtedly, the field offers fertile grounds for critical investigation. Surprisingly, when it comes to the regional scenario of Assam, apart from a few scattered articles across newspapers and journals, book-length scholarly studies on children's literature are almost non-existent. The field of children's literature in Assam is, therefore, not only fertile but is promising as a rich, vibrant, yet underrepresented body of children's literature awaiting scholarly investigation and intellectual rigor.

Kathy G. Short in her article, "What's Trending in Children's Literature and Why It Matters" states that:

> Children's and young adult literature occupy what is considered the "sweet spot" within publishing, evidencing strong growth and new opportunities. While other readerships have stagnated, the sales of children's books have continued to rise, particularly young adult and middle-grade books. Strong sales, combined with new technologies that encourage innovation in book format and design, have enticed new authors and illustrators, some of whom are transnational and thus move across global contexts, to provide a greater range of books for children (2).

While G. Short talks about the developing trends of children's literature across media in the Western context, the scenario is not very different in India and Assam. The transnational spirit of children's literature in Assam can be discerned as early as the first half of the twentieth century when Western children's classics such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Blue Bird* among many others were translated and added to the canon of the emerging body of children's literature. In contemporary times different literary bodies such as Asom Sahitya Sabha, and educational institutions of the state have taken initiative to digitize children's book for easy access to both local and global readers. As Kuladhar Saikia, the current president of Asom Sahitya Sabha Says in an interview, "It is the first time that the literary body has stepped into the internet world. This step, I believe, will help in taking Assamese literature worldwide. People living in different parts of the world will now be able to access these writings" (Saikia). Children's literature in Assam in the present times, therefore, offers fertile terrain for critical examination. And given the interdisciplinary scope of the field, children's literature in Assam can be analysed through various lenses: historical, pedagogical, cultural, and comparative frameworks among several other approaches. Of particular interest is the comparative framework, which offers the possibility of studying children's literature from the comparative perspective, appropriate to the varied sub-cultural traditions of India.

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Endnote

[1]All translations in the study, unless cited, are done by the research scholar.