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WOMEN LEADS IN 'AGNISNAN', 'ADAJYA' AND 'AAKASHI TORAR KOTHARE': AN EXAMINATION OF ARCHETYPAL WOMAN'S 'ESSENTIALIST IDENTITY'

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Abstract:

Essentialism or its more lucid epithet Essentialist Identity of woman is reminiscent of a powerful and influential school of postcolonialist feminism that distinctly popped up in 1960s. It seeks to explain the varied predicaments of women in a preeminently patriarchal set up characterized by the hegemonic socio cultural and political codes of identity, traditions, and modes of economy, gender politics, representation, resistance and identity. In a typical Indian context, it implies the compulsion, both conditioned and forced, on the part of the woman to abide by the archetypal roles defined and assigned to her by the well-structured male hegemony of the predominantly patriarchal socio-cultural order. It is what denies her any dignity, reward, recognition, self-esteem and even remuneration. The three contemporary Assamese award winning films are probed into to discern and decipher its all engulfing regressive impact on Indian woman.

The term 'essentialism' of the women in a society derived from post-colonial feminist ideology. Postcolonial feminism, which is sometimes known as Third World Feminism partly draws on Post colonialism, which discusses experiences endured during colonialism, including migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place and responses to the influential discourses of imperial Europe. Postcolonial feminism centers on racism, ethnic issues, and the long-lasting economic, political, and cultural effects of colonialism, inextricably bound up with the

unique gendered realities of non-White non-Western women. It sees the parallels between recently decolonized nations and the state of women within patriarchy—both postcolonialism and postcolonial feminism take the perspective of a socially marginalized subgroup in their relationship to the dominant culture. It is from this perspective the notion of ‘essentialist identity’ as applied to the traditional Indian woman assumes profound significance in India. In Indian context, it implies the compulsion on the part of the woman to stick to the archetypal roles defined and assigned to her by the well-structured male hegemony of the predominantly patriarchal socio-cultural order. It is what denies her any dignity, reward, recognition, self-esteem and even remuneration.

Few will deny that many of the awards winning films of contemporary Assamese filmmakers are a veracious portrayal and cerebral critique of the psyche and predicament of the archetypal Indian woman in a predominantly male-oriented society although certain other crucial, socially relevant and cerebral themes are also juxtaposed in these films. Almost all of the women protagonists in the films teeter on the edges of an ‘inessentialist identity’ which they are forced to embrace by the traditional male hegemony of the society. Paradoxically enough, most of these talented filmmakers irrespective of gender explore both the inner and outer worlds of their women with an extraordinary insight into the female psyche. Their attitude is one of compassion and understanding. True that their women are not always Saint Joans or Noras. But true to their real life, they always struggle to reconcile to their fate, sometimes suffering meekly, at other times compromising with their debilitating circumstances, and at yet other times rebelling against the system in their reel life. Consequently there looms large a series of woman protagonists in these films who at once catch our attention and make us introspect. They provoke us to probe into the lacunae of the socio-cultural system in which they operate or are forced to operate.

Physician turned theatre personality Dr. Santwana Bardoloi’s directorial debut, *Adajya* (1996) is based on a novel by Jnapith Awardee Indira Goswami. The narrative of *Datal Hatir Uwne Khowa Howdah* (The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker) which the film is based on, is a story of widows, a saga of the tenant-landowner conflict, a spectacle of the relationship between man and woman with all the attendant complications of caste and social hierarchies. Indira powerfully exposes the hypocrisy of Brahmins, their greed and their lop-sided values, and the much ambivalence of their attitudes towards the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak. But *Adajya* is, above all, a moving tale of the plight and untold sufferings of young widows in a male-dominated society that stifles the spirit of the woman in the name of customs and traditions. There are three widows in the novel. Durga, the elderly widowed sister of the *adhikar* is an unhappy woman harassed and rejected by her husband’s family as an inauspicious woman. She scrupulously observes the restrictions imposed on widows, quarrels with her sister-in-law, the senior *Gossainee* and mistress of the *sattr*, over trivial matters and broods over her misfortunes. *Saru Gossainee* is the young and beautiful widow of *Indranath*’s uncle who was banished from the *sattr* by his father for daring to object to his dissolute ways. When her husband was alive they used to get enough revenue from their lands and offerings from the disciples but with the communists inciting the peasants in the countryside, she has fallen on bad days. Yet she carries on bravely, relying on the support of *Mahidhar Bapu*, a brahmin from *Haramdo* who has become her trusted agent and estate manager. Though she scrupulously maintains a

proper distance from him and he is indifferent towards her, he gradually becomes a part of her dreams and fantasies. Giribala is the third widow in the novel. A beautiful and headstrong young woman, she protests strongly, albeit ineffectively, against the social conventions which oppress her and ossify her life. When she finds no respite, she ends herself. Set in colonial Assam, the film is a statement on the systematic, institutionalized and cruel oppression of women who have lost their husbands and consequently their appointed place in their family and community.

A seasoned filmmaker Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia had a predilection for the portrayal of the predicament of woman as an individual in his films. And all his women are inexorably trapped in a world of tainted, fractured identities, alienation, and subjugation-----a world controlled by a well-structured male hegemony, a world that is meant for males than females. Menoka, Laxmi, Kiran, Jayanti are all victims and sufferers, and the dynamics of the social machinery always have a crucial role as the perpetrator although the nature and form of this role vary from milieu to milieu, from character to character. Sometimes it takes the form of callous, insensitive, or unfaithful husbands; sometimes it is the atrocious, devitalizing customs and traditions; at certain other times it could be merely the inability of the woman to understand and assert her own 'essentiality' in an essentially male-oriented social framework. Menoka is the central character in Dr. Saikia's much talked about film 'Agnisnan' (The Ordeal). The film is a haunting tale of a woman's 'inessentialist Identity' and her daredevil attitude to assert her own independent will in a traditional society controlled by male hegemony. Menoka is a successful housewife who leaves no stone unturned to fit into the role her family and her society expect her to do. But then her husband Mohikanta suddenly brings in a young girl, marries her and starts making love to her all before the eyes of Menoka totally ignoring her. He does all that as if he were privileged to do such an act. Menoka feels her world shattered, her essence, her pride as a conventionally successful woman badly tainted. She can never justify Mohikanta's act, and resolves to set things right in her own way. She establishes a rapport with Modan, a thief but compassionate and respectful to her, and goes physical with him. Kiran is the other important woman character in 'Agnisnan'. A meek, mild, frail, shadowlike character, Kiran is reminiscent of a typical conformist woman in a male-dominated society. She is as it were born to be the victim of the male hegemony. She has not much of a choice about what happens to her. She has to be the so-called second wife, almost a concubine of an influential male member of the society.

Now a leading woman filmmaker of the country, Manju Borah's most acclaimed, multi award winning film, *Akashi Torar Kothare (A Tale Told Thousand Times, 2003)* is centred around the atrocious gender bias that refuses to go in a traditionally patriarchal society even today. The film subtly depicts the age-old suppression of woman despite her vital role in the upbringing of the family and well-being of the society at large. It is about the pains and voiceless suffering of the archetypal woman in a traditional society defined by a male hegemony. The story is about Akashitara, a vibrant and young scholar doing research on the status of woman through the folklores of Assam. Thus she comes to know how the womenfolk down the ages have been subjected to a multitude of tyrannical experiences. The traditions reveal to her that the young girls were forced to become Devadasis to entertain the rich and the powerful. Even old women were made to dance nude to propitiate the gods to shower

benevolence on human beings. Visibly disturbed Akashitora finds an apparently liberal and compassionate friend in Raghava who wishes to help her every possible way in her research. But once they get married, the stubborn male chauvinist in Raghava manifests itself shattering Akashitora's world. She has to abandon not only her passion, her own self but is forbidden to meet her old acquaintances. Devastated at heart, she virtually surrenders to her fate with little of visible resistance. But her passive protest gains some semblance of a voice in her ultimate refusal to succumb to the archetypal house wife's happy-go-lucky kind of conformism.

The present paper is just an humble attempt to peep into the world of shattered dreams, thwarted hopes, tainted identity and morbid existences, and also the 'flipper of hope' that the woman protagonists in these contemporary films experience in life. These films unveil before us the familiar world of Indian women---a world that relegates woman to a marginalized entity, a world marked by acute gender bias, a world which often turns out to be nothing less than a hell for the woman-----a world where life continues, but living ends for her. It is a male world, the callousness of which often shatters and thwarts the dreams and aspirations of Menoka, Kiran, Akashitora, Durga, Saru Gossanee, Giribala, but it is where they are fated to persist or perish. **References:**

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Films

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2. Adjya(The Flight)(DVD)
3. Akashi TorarKothare(A Tale told a Thousand Time)(VCD)