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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reconstructing History and Representing Women: A New Historicist Reading of Joymati-Centred Assamese Drama

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ABSTRACT

In Assamese historical drama, the character of Joymoti occupies a significant position as a representation of history, political power, female sacrifice, and national consciousness. The historical episode associated with Joymoti, situated within the political conflicts and struggles for power during the Ahom reign, subsequently evolved into a distinct narrative in Assamese literature and culture. In particular, Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymoti and Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari offer literary reconstructions of the same historical event, presenting women's duties, sacrifice, resistance, and political agency from different perspectives. The present study aims to examine the reconstruction of history, the dynamics of power, and the representation of women in these two plays through the theoretical framework of New Historicism. The study primarily draws upon the theoretical perspectives of Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose. Employing a qualitative and comparative textual analysis, it examines the plot structures, characterization, dialogues, political conflicts, and historical narratives presented in the selected plays. The analysis reveals that Joymoti's historical character functions not merely as a literary representation of past events but also as a cultural symbol of moral resistance against political authority, the social construction of female identity, and collective historical memory. However, a significant duality emerges between Joymoti's identity as a figure of resistance and her idealized representation as a devoted wife. This duality demonstrates that literary representations of history are deeply embedded in the prevailing social ideals, power relations, and cultural consciousness of the periods in which the plays were composed.The study seeks to offer a critical understanding of the interconnectedness of historical reconstruction and the representation of women in Assamese historical drama, highlighting how literary narratives reinterpret historical experiences through the ideological, political, and cultural contexts of their production.

Keywords: *New Historicism, Joymati, Historical Reconstruction, Representation of Women, Political Power, Cultural Memory, Assamese Historical Drama*

INTRODUCTION

Literature and history share a profound and interconnected relationship. While history provides a factual account of past events, social structures, and political circumstances, literature reconstructs these historical realities through a creative perspective.

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Particularly in historical drama, past events and characters acquire new meanings under the influence of the playwright's intellectual perspectives, ideological positions, and contemporary socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, historical drama should not be regarded merely as a dramatic representation of past events; rather, it needs to be examined as a literary discourse constructed through the interrelationship of history, power, and cultural ideologies.

Historical drama occupies a significant position in the development of Assamese dramatic literature. Several notable plays have been written around themes such as political conflicts, struggles for power, heroism, patriotism, and sacrifice during the Ahom period. These plays not only offer literary reconstructions of Assam's historical events and personalities but also reflect the construction of national consciousness, cultural identity, and social values. Within this tradition of Assamese historical drama, the character of Joymati holds particular significance. Amid the political instability of the Ahom kingdom, Joymati's unwavering determination to protect the life of Gadapani and her refusal to disclose her husband's whereabouts despite severe torture established her as a symbol of courage, sacrifice, and moral resistance. Over time, this historical figure has been represented in various forms within Assamese literature and culture.

Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati and Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari, both based on the historical events surrounding Joymati, are two significant works of Assamese historical drama. Although both playwrights draw upon the same historical event, they present distinct dramatic representations of Joymati's character through their respective creative perspectives and ideological positions. In these plays, the literary reconstruction of history unfolds through political struggles for power, the oppressive nature of the ruling system, Joymati's moral determination, and her self-sacrifice. In particular, her character embodies not only marital devotion and a sense of duty but also the agency of a woman who actively resists political authority.

In this context, an examination of these two plays through the theoretical framework of New Historicism is particularly relevant. New Historicism approaches literary texts in relation to their historical, social, and political contexts while exploring the influence of power and ideology on the literary reconstruction of history. Accordingly, the present research paper seeks to analyse the reconstruction of history, the structures of political power, and the representation of women in Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati and Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari. More specifically, the study aims to interpret Joymati's sacrifice not merely as the fulfilment of an ideal wife's duty but also as an expression of moral resistance against political authority and women's autonomous decision-making. Through this perspective, the study attempts to examine the historical and cultural significance of the two plays.

OBJECTIVES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of the present study is to analyse the literary reconstruction of historical events and the representation of women in Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati and Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari from a New Historicist perspective. In particular, the study aims to examine the interrelationship between political power and resistance, Joymati's agency in autonomous decision-making, the socio-cultural significance of her self-sacrifice, and the influence of contemporary ideological consciousness on the construction of her character in the two plays.

The study specifically investigates how the two playwrights reconstruct the historical events associated with Joymati, how the relationship between marital duty and political resistance is articulated through her sacrifice, and the extent to which her character reflects female agency. Furthermore, it undertakes a comparative examination of the similarities and differences in the representation of national consciousness, cultural values, and ideological constructions of womanhood in the two plays.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to reassess Joymati's character beyond the conventional representation of a self-sacrificing woman or an ideal wife by examining the complex interrelationship between history, power, and female subjectivity. Through this approach, the study seeks to reveal the underlying significance of the literary reconstruction of history, women's political positioning, and cultural representation in Assamese historical drama.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions have been formulated to conduct a New Historicist analysis of Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati and Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari:

•How are the historical events associated with Joymati and her character reconstructed through literary representation in the two selected plays?

•How do the two plays reflect the interrelationship between political power, the oppressive nature of the ruling system, and resistance?

•To what extent is women's agency in autonomous decision-making reflected in Joymati's self-sacrifice and her resistance to royal authority?

•How do the socio-cultural ideologies and nationalist consciousness prevailing during the periods in which the plays were written influence the construction of Joymati's character?

•What are the similarities and differences between the two playwrights' perspectives on the reconstruction of history and the representation of women?

Through an examination of these research questions, the present study seeks to analyse the interrelationship between history, political power, and the representation of female subjectivity in the two selected plays from a New Historicist perspective.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research paper adopts New Historicism as its primary theoretical and analytical framework, alongside Close Textual Analysis and Comparative Textual Analysis as the principal methods of investigation. Drawing upon the New Historicist perspectives of Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose, the study examines the interplay between literary discourse, historical contexts, and power relations in the two selected plays.

Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati and Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari have been selected as the primary sources of the study. Through close textual analysis and comparative examination, the research investigates the literary reconstruction of historical events, the structures of political power, resistance, and the representation of women in the two plays. Secondary sources, including relevant historical texts, works of literary criticism, theoretical writings, and research articles, have been consulted to examine the historical background of the plays and the socio-cultural contexts in which they were written.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A review of previous research and relevant literature plays a significant role in establishing the theoretical and analytical foundations of any academic study. Several scholars and literary critics have examined Joymati's historical character, its literary reconstruction, the representation of women, and its relationship with nationalist consciousness. The following section reviews selected research articles and scholarly works that are particularly relevant to the present study.

Barua and Lal (2021), in their research article "History, Memory and Legend: Contextualizing Joymoti Utsav in Assam," examine the historical memory of Joymati, the origins of Joymoti Utsav, and its cultural significance in Assamese society. The authors particularly explore how the ideal of Joymati's self-sacrifice contributed to the development of nationalist consciousness and women's consciousness in Assam during the early twentieth century. Their study provides valuable insights into the cultural reconstruction of Joymati's historical identity and its significance within the broader socio-cultural context of Assam.

Rajkhowa (2015), in his research article "Coming Back to Life: Jyotiprasad's Joymoti and Nationalist Politics in Assam, 1890s–1940s," examines the relationship between nationalist politics and cultural representation in Assam, with reference to Lakshminath Bezbarua's play Joymati Kunwari and Jyotiprasad Agarwala's film Joymoti. Rajkhowa considers historical drama and cinema as important cultural forms through which nationalist consciousness was constructed and articulated. His study offers a useful perspective on the relationship between the literary representation of Joymati and the political and cultural environment of colonial Assam.

Chaudhuri (2014), in her article "Rewriting Women—Revisiting Women's Narratives in Film: Adayja and Joymati," explores questions of women's representation in female-centred cinematic narratives. Her examination of Joymati's cinematic representation provides a relevant critical perspective for understanding women's social positioning and cultural representation. However, the primary focus of her study is cinematic narratives rather than a comparative textual analysis of historical plays.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

New Historicism is an important theoretical approach in modern literary criticism that examines the complex relationship between literature and history. Emerging in the 1980s, this approach challenges the notion of literary texts as autonomous works of art existing independently of their historical contexts. Instead, it emphasises the study of literature in relation to the social, political, and cultural circumstances surrounding its production, circulation, and reception. From a New Historicist perspective, literature is not merely a reflection of contemporary social realities; it also actively participates in the construction of social ideologies, power relations, and cultural identities. Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose have made significant contributions to the development of this critical approach (Greenblatt, 1988, pp. 1–20; Montrose, 1989, pp. 15–17).

Stephen Greenblatt's Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare (1980) and Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England (1988) played a significant role in establishing the theoretical foundations of New Historicism. Greenblatt examines the relationship between literary production, historical circumstances, social institutions, and structures of cultural power. His concept of Self-Fashioning suggests that individual identity is not formed entirely through personal autonomy but is shaped by social institutions, religious beliefs, dominant ideologies, and existing power relations (Greenblatt, 1980, pp. 1–3). This perspective provides a useful framework for examining the social and cultural forces that influence the behaviour, choices, and identities of literary characters. Similarly, Greenblatt's concept of the Circulation of Social Energy highlights the continuous exchange of cultural values, beliefs, and ideologies between literature and society (Greenblatt, 1988, pp. 1–20). From this perspective, literary texts do not simply reflect existing social conditions; they also contribute to the production,

circulation, and reconstruction of social meanings and cultural values.

Another prominent scholar associated with New Historicism, Louis Montrose, explores the mutually constitutive relationship between literary texts and historical realities in his essay "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture." Montrose argues that the production, circulation, and interpretation of literary texts are shaped by particular historical circumstances, while literary discourses themselves participate in the construction of social and cultural meanings (Montrose, 1989, pp. 15–17). In this context, his formulation, "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history," is particularly significant. The first part refers to the historical situatedness of literary texts and their relationship with the social conditions in which they are produced. The second emphasises that our understanding of the past is mediated through historical documents, linguistic narratives, and cultural representations (Montrose, 1989, p. 20). Thus, New Historicism does not treat history as a fixed background against which literary works are produced. Rather, it places the dynamic relationship between historical processes and literary representations at the centre of critical inquiry.

Michel Foucault's ideas concerning the relationship between power and knowledge have also significantly influenced the theoretical development of New Historicism. In Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977, Foucault examines the interconnected processes through which knowledge, truth, and power operate within society. He argues that the production, circulation, and acceptance of truth cannot be understood independently of existing structures of power. Social institutions and dominant discourses play an important role in determining what is recognised and accepted as legitimate knowledge or truth (Foucault, 1980, pp. 131–133). This perspective makes it possible to examine how authority is established within literary narratives, whose voices are recognised as legitimate, and whose perspectives are marginalised or suppressed. It also extends the understanding of power beyond political authority and coercive control to include its operation through social ideologies, cultural values, and gender relations.

These theoretical perspectives provide a valuable framework for examining historical drama not merely as a dramatic representation of past events but as a form of literary reconstruction shaped by historical circumstances and social ideologies. In particular, Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati and Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari offer significant scope for a New Historicist analysis of political conflict, the oppressive nature of royal authority, and women's resistance. Joymati's refusal to reveal Gadapani's whereabouts, despite political pressure and physical torture, may be interpreted as an expression of both personal moral conviction and political resistance. At the same time, her resistance is closely associated with cultural ideals of marital devotion, self-sacrifice, and ideal womanhood in both plays. This dual representation reveals the complex relationship between political power, resistance, and patriarchal ideology in the construction of Joymati's character.

Accordingly, the present study draws upon Greenblatt's concepts of the social construction of identity and the circulation of cultural energy, Montrose's understanding of the mutually constitutive relationship between literature and history, and Foucault's analysis of power and knowledge as its principal theoretical perspectives. These concepts provide an analytical basis for examining the literary reconstruction of Joymati's historical character, the structures of political power, women's agency in autonomous decision-making, and the influence of contemporary socio-cultural ideologies in the two selected plays. By employing this theoretical framework, the study seeks to explore the multiple dimensions of Joymati's representation as a historical and literary figure, particularly in relation to the interconnected processes of history, power, resistance, and the construction of female subjectivity.

Reconstruction of History in Joymati-Centred Assamese Drama

The reconstruction of history is an important literary process in historical drama. Although playwrights draw upon past events, historical figures, and socio-political circumstances, their representations are not confined to the reproduction of historical facts. Historical events acquire new literary meanings through the playwright's creative vision, ideological position, and the socio-cultural environment in which the work is produced. From a New Historicist perspective, history and literature are not separate domains; rather, literary narratives participate in the reconstruction of historical events, power relations, and cultural ideologies (Montrose, 1989, pp. 15–20).

From this perspective, Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati and Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari are particularly significant. Although both plays are based on the same historical event, the playwrights offer distinct literary interpretations of history through their treatment of plot, dialogue, characterization, and dramatic conflict. In particular, the struggles for power within the Ahom kingdom, Gadapani's political crisis, and Joymati's sacrifice establish a complex relationship between history, morality, and the representation of women in the two plays.

Historical Background of Joymati

The historical events associated with Joymati are closely connected with the political instability and struggles for power that marked the final decades of the seventeenth century in the Ahom kingdom. During the reign of Sulikphaa, popularly known as Lora Raja (1679–1681 CE), political conflicts over succession to the throne intensified within the Ahom royal court. In

particular, the growing political influence of Laluk Sola Borphukan led to repressive measures against potential claimants to the throne. Under these circumstances, the life of the Ahom prince Gadapani was placed in danger (Barua & Lal, 2021, pp. 3–4).

According to traditional historical accounts, Joymati advised her husband, Gadapani, to go into hiding to protect himself from political persecution. Subsequently, the royal authorities subjected Joymati to pressure and torture in an attempt to discover Gadapani's whereabouts. Despite the suffering inflicted upon her, she refused to reveal his location and eventually died as a consequence of the torture. Her steadfastness established her in Assamese historical memory as a symbol of courage, sacrifice, and moral determination.However, a distinction can be drawn between the historical accounts of Joymati's life and her subsequent literary representations. Barua and Lal (2021), in their examination of Joymati's history, popular memory, and literary representations, demonstrate how her sacrifice acquired new cultural meanings through its association with nationalist consciousness and the ideological construction of womanhood. Particularly during the colonial period, literary reconstructions of Joymati's historical character contributed to the revival of Assam's historical pride and the articulation of Assamese cultural identity.

From a New Historicist perspective, two distinct historical contexts must therefore be considered. The first is the late seventeenth-century political environment of the Ahom kingdom, in which Joymati lived and became involved in the struggle for royal succession. The second is the socio-cultural environment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when her historical character was reconstructed through dramatic literature. An examination of the relationship between these two historical contexts provides an important basis for understanding the literary reconstruction of Joymati's history.

Reconstruction of History in Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati

Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati (1900) is a significant work of Assamese historical drama. The play dramatizes the political instability of the Ahom kingdom, conflicts surrounding succession to the throne, and the historical events associated with Joymati's sacrifice. By combining historical material with literary imagination, dialogue, and characterization, the playwright offers a moral and cultural interpretation of political history.At the beginning of the play, the historical setting is established through the introduction of characters associated with Joymati's story and the political environment of the Ahom royal court. In particular, the presentation of royal figures and court-related events in the first act creates a dramatic representation of the power-centred political atmosphere of the Ahom kingdom (Gohain Barua, n.d., Act 1). Through this arrangement, the political dimensions of history form the foundation of the dramatic conflict.

One of the distinctive features of Gohain Barua's reconstruction of history is the connection he establishes between political events and Joymati's personal life and moral principles. In the playwright's representation, Joymati is not merely a royal woman caught in a political crisis; she emerges as an active character whose decisions, sense of duty, and sacrifice influence the course of historical events.As the play progresses, political conflicts are presented alongside familial relationships, marital responsibilities, and moral dilemmas. The dramatic developments surrounding Joymati reveal the close relationship between her personal life and the larger political circumstances. Consequently, her sacrifice acquires a broader political and moral significance rather than remaining an isolated instance of personal suffering.

The ideological dimension of Gohain Barua's reconstruction of history is particularly important in this context. By emphasizing marital devotion, sacrifice, and moral determination, the playwright transforms Joymati into an exemplary figure embodying socially valued ideals of womanhood. Nevertheless, her idealization does not entirely diminish her resistant agency. By remaining firm in her decision against the demands of royal authority, Joymati demonstrates a distinct moral position.

A New Historicist reading suggests that Joymati's historical identity is closely associated with the socio-cultural ideals prevailing during the playwright's time. The elevation of female sacrifice and devotion into moral virtues contributes to the cultural reconstruction of her historical character. Greenblatt's (1980, pp. 1–3) concept of the social construction of identity provides a useful theoretical framework for interpreting this process.Thus, in Gohain Barua's Joymati, the political history of the Ahom kingdom acquires new literary significance through its association with Joymati's moral determination and sacrifice. The reconstruction of history in the play reveals the interconnected relationship between political power, moral responsibility, and the idealization of womanhood.

Another significant aspect of Gohain Barua's reconstruction of history is evident in the preface to the play. The playwright discusses the representation of historical characters, the creation of dramatic effect, and the role of literary imagination in composing historical drama. He also refers to his own approach to the characterization of Joymati and certain revisions made to the text (Gohain Barua, n.d., preface). These observations suggest that the literary representation of history in the play is a deliberate creative process.

Furthermore, the scenes set within the royal court reveal a conflict between political authority and moral opposition. For instance, the dialogue involving the king, Rajmao, and other royal figures raises questions

concerning the ruler's decisions and the distinction between justice and injustice. Rajmao expresses her objections to the king's conduct, while the royal authority maintains its position (Gohain Barua, n.d., p. 58). This scene presents political power not simply as unquestionable authority but as a system confronted by moral criticism and resistance.These examples demonstrate that, in dramatizing the historical events associated with Joymati, Gohain Barua places considerable emphasis on the power relations within the royal court and the moral principles underlying political conduct. Accordingly, the reconstruction of history in the play involves not only the dramatization of political events but also an exploration of the moral legitimacy of power and the representation of ideal womanhood.

Reconstruction of History in Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari

Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari (1915) presents a distinctive dramatic reconstruction of the political conflicts of the Ahom kingdom, the threats to Gadapani's life, and the historical events surrounding Joymati's sacrifice. Drawing upon historical events and personalities, Bezbarua employs imaginative dialogue, dramatic conflict, and characterization to give history a new literary form.The nature of historical reconstruction in the play becomes evident in the playwright's preface. Bezbarua explains that the purpose of historical drama is not merely to reproduce past events but to combine historical material with creative imagination to achieve dramatic effect. He also discusses the dramatic arrangement of historical events and the imaginative construction of certain characters (Bezbarua, n.d., p. 33). This indicates that, for Bezbarua, history provides the foundation of dramatic creation, while literary imagination plays an essential role in transforming historical material into drama.

The first scene of the first act introduces the domestic environment of Gadapani's household. The play begins with a family scene involving Gadapani's sons, Lai and Lechai (Bezbarua, n.d., pp. 35–36). Through this opening, the playwright presents the historical figures not merely in terms of their political identities but also through their personal experiences and familial relationships. This domestic setting gives greater emotional and human significance to the political crisis that unfolds later in the play.

The conflict surrounding political authority becomes more pronounced in the first scene of the second act through the conversation among Lora Raja, Borgohain, and Burhagohain. In discussing the threat posed by Gadapani, Lora Raja expresses concern about Gadapani's potential political rivalry. Borgohain, meanwhile, refers to Gadapani's courage and seeks to present him as a danger to the existing royal authority (Bezbarua, n.d., p. 46). These exchanges reveal the political mentality through which the suppression of a potential rival is justified in the name of protecting royal power.

The New Historicist significance of this scene lies in its representation of political authority as something sustained not merely through formal possession of the throne but also through advice, fear, conspiracy, and strategies of political control. In particular, Borgohain's statements construct a specific political discourse around Gadapani, portraying him as a threat to the ruling establishment and thereby providing a justification for action against him. This process can be examined through Foucault's (1980, pp. 131–133) understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge.

In another scene of the second act, the conversation between Lora Raja and Borgohain addresses the search for Gadapani, his potential political influence, and the intentions of the ruling authorities (Bezbarua, n.d., p. 50). Their discussion reflects the anxiety of the ruling establishment concerning Gadapani's courage and political significance. Through such exchanges, the playwright reconstructs the power struggles of the Ahom kingdom in a dramatic form.

In contrast to the political authority exercised by the ruling establishment, Joymati's character embodies moral determination and the capacity for independent decision-making. The playwright does not present her historical sacrifice solely as an act of marital devotion. Rather, her steadfastness also becomes an expression of moral resistance against the oppressive character of royal authority. At the same time, this resistant agency remains closely connected with cultural ideals of marital duty, religious faith, and ideal womanhood. In this context, Montrose's (1989, pp. 15–20) concepts of the historicity of texts and the textuality of history are particularly relevant. Bezbarua reconstructs seventeenth-century historical events within the socio-cultural environment of the early twentieth century. Consequently, Joymati's character reflects not only the historical circumstances of the Ahom period but also the moral ideals and cultural values associated with the playwright's own time.

In particular, the representation of Joymati's sacrifice through the ideals of marital devotion and moral responsibility contributes to the construction of a culturally significant image of womanhood. At the same time, her firm decisions and resistance to royal authority suggest the presence of female agency. Her character therefore reveals a dual representation in which traditional ideals of womanhood coexist with the capacity for autonomous decision-making. Thus, in Joymati Kunwari, the reconstruction of history extends beyond the dramatization of political events. Through the representation of royal authority, political conspiracies, moral resistance, and the idealization of female sacrifice, historical events acquire multiple layers of literary significance.

A comparative examination of Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati and Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari reveals two distinct dramatic interpretations of

the same historical events. While Gohain Barua places particular emphasis on Joymati's moral determination, devotion to duty, and the idealization of womanhood, Bezbarua gives considerable attention to political conspiracies, struggles for power, and the dramatic arrangement of historical events. Nevertheless, in both plays, Joymati's sacrifice is closely connected with moral and cultural ideals. A New Historicist reading of these works therefore reveals how the literary reconstruction of history is shaped by the interaction of political power, ideology, and the socio-cultural consciousness of the periods in which the plays were written.

Power and the Representation of Women in Joymati-Centred Drama

Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati and Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari reveal a complex relationship between political power, resistance, and the representation of women. Set against the backdrop of struggles for power within the Ahom kingdom, both plays show how Joymati's personal life becomes closely entangled with political developments. Consequently, her marital devotion, moral determination, and sacrifice acquire political significance beyond the domestic sphere. A New Historicist reading of these plays makes it possible to examine not only the oppressive exercise of political authority but also the ways in which women's resistance is represented and shaped by prevailing socio-cultural ideologies.

Royal Authority, Patriarchy, and the Position of Women

In Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati and Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari, the relationship between royal authority and women's social and political positions is particularly significant. Both plays portray struggles for power through conflicts over succession to the throne, political conspiracies, the exercise of royal authority, and attempts to eliminate potential rivals. Kings, ministers, and other influential male figures occupy central positions within this political structure. Since the authority to make political decisions and exercise power rests predominantly with men, women's formal participation in political affairs remains limited. Nevertheless, Joymati occupies a distinctive position within this male-dominated system of power.

Although Joymati possesses no formal political authority, her knowledge of Gadapani's whereabouts becomes politically significant. The ruling authorities seek this information to consolidate their power, but Joymati refuses to disclose it. Thus, despite her exclusion from institutional authority, she occupies a position from which she can obstruct the intentions of those in power. Her silence, therefore, should not be understood as an expression of passivity or helplessness. Rather, it can be interpreted as a conscious act of resistance against royal authority.

In this context, Michel Foucault's understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge provides a useful theoretical perspective. According to Foucault (1980, pp. 131–133), the production, circulation, and recognition of knowledge cannot be separated from relations of power. Viewed through this framework, the royal authorities' attempt to obtain information about Gadapani's whereabouts becomes an exercise of political power. Joymati's refusal to disclose that information, however, obstructs their efforts. The control of information and the refusal to surrender it thus establish a significant relationship between power and resistance.

At the same time, Joymati's resistant position cannot be examined independently of the patriarchal social order in which her character is situated. In both plays, her moral determination and sacrifice are closely associated with marital loyalty, pativrata dharma (the traditional ideal of a wife's devotion to her husband), and ideal womanhood. In Gohain Barua's play, Joymati's devotion to duty and self-sacrifice are elevated to the status of exemplary moral virtues. In Bezbarua's play, her character is more explicitly associated with religious faith, familial responsibilities, and established social values. Consequently, although her courage and capacity for independent decision-making are acknowledged, they are largely interpreted within the framework of traditional ideals of femininity.

This dual representation reveals the complexity of women's position within a patriarchal society. Joymati emerges as an active woman who takes a firm stand against royal authority while simultaneously embodying the socially recognised image of an ideal wife. Barua and Lal (2021), in their discussion of Joymati's cultural representation, similarly draw attention to the coexistence of women's courage and possibilities for social participation with traditional ideals of womanhood.

It would therefore be inadequate to interpret Joymati exclusively either as a woman subjected to patriarchal authority or as an entirely autonomous figure of resistance. Instead, her characterization reveals a multidimensional representation of womanhood shaped by the interaction of political resistance, personal morality, and patriarchal ideology.

Joymati's Sacrifice, Resistance, and Female Agency

Joymati's sacrifice occupies a significant place in the historical and cultural memory of Assam. In conventional literary representations, her sacrifice has largely been associated with marital devotion, a sense of duty, and the ideal of womanhood. However, when examined in relation to the political circumstances surrounding her historical experience, her sacrifice also reveals an important dimension of resistance to authority and independent decision-making.

By refusing to reveal Gadapani's whereabouts, Joymati places her moral convictions above the demands of

royal authority. Her determination to uphold this decision, even in the face of torture, gives her personal sense of duty a wider political significance. Under these circumstances, her silence becomes more than an expression of individual endurance; it represents a conscious refusal to submit to the coercive exercise of power. From a New Historicist perspective, such resistance cannot be understood as operating entirely outside existing power relations. Rather, it emerges within the very structures of authority that seek to control her.

In this context, the concepts of subversion and containment explored in Greenblatt's discussion of "Invisible Bullets" (1988, pp. 21–65), offers a relevant framework for analysis. This concept helps explain how expressions of resistance within literary narratives may subsequently be incorporated into prevailing social and ideological structures. A similar tension can be observed in the representation of Joymati. While her refusal challenges the intentions of royal authority, her resistance is simultaneously interpreted through the traditional ideals of pativrata dharma, marital devotion, and self-sacrifice. As a result, her actions acquire political significance while also contributing to the reaffirmation of conventional ideals of womanhood.

Nevertheless, it would be equally problematic to interpret Joymati's sacrifice solely as a product of patriarchal ideology. In both plays, her character demonstrates the capacity for independent judgment, moral determination, and active engagement with a situation of political crisis. In this regard, the concept of female agency becomes particularly relevant. Female agency does not necessarily imply the possession of formal political authority. It also refers to a woman's ability to make decisions within existing social constraints and to influence circumstances through those decisions. In Joymati's case, this agency is expressed through her determination to protect Gadapani and her refusal to abandon that decision despite severe persecution.

In Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati, unwavering commitment to moral duty and self-sacrifice are presented as central features of Joymati's character. Through her sacrifice, the playwright constructs an elevated image of ideal womanhood. In contrast, Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari places greater emphasis on the relationship between Joymati's moral determination, religious faith, familial responsibility, and marital devotion. Nevertheless, in both plays, her sacrifice extends beyond the sphere of personal duty and acquires the significance of political resistance. Joymati's sacrifice therefore reveals a complex interaction between morality, politics, and cultural ideology. Her character simultaneously embodies traditional ideals of womanhood and the resistant agency of a woman who remains committed to her own decision against royal authority. Her sacrifice should consequently be examined not merely as the fulfilment of marital duty but also as an expression of conscious decision-making and moral resistance by a woman confronting political power.

A Comparative Analysis of the Representation of Women in the Two Plays

Although Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati and Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari are based on the same historical event, they reveal notable similarities and differences in the construction of Joymati's character, the ideological representation of womanhood, and the portrayal of political resistance. Both playwrights present Joymati as a symbol of courage, sacrifice, and moral determination. However, differences in their creative perspectives and the socio-cultural consciousness of their respective periods contribute to distinct interpretations of these ideals.

In Gohain Barua's play, a close relationship is established between Joymati's historical role and the ideal of womanhood. Her devotion to duty, moral strength, and sacrifice receive particular emphasis. As her marital responsibilities become connected with a broader political crisis, her sacrifice acquires social and political significance beyond her personal life. In this representation, Joymati emerges both as an ideal wife and as a symbol of moral resistance. In Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari, the relationship between Joymati's character and religious faith, marital devotion, and cultural values is more pronounced. The playwright associates her moral determination and sacrifice with traditional ideals of femininity. Nevertheless, her character is not confined to passive suffering. Her personal decisions and steadfast position in the face of political crisis also suggest the presence of an active female agency.

History, Cultural Memory, and National Consciousness

History and cultural memory are closely interconnected. While history preserves factual accounts of past events and historical figures, cultural memory gives these events and figures new meanings by relating them to the collective experiences, values, and identities of a society. Through this process, certain historical figures acquire significance beyond their individual identities and become symbols of broader social and cultural ideals. Joymati's historical character provides a significant example of this transformation. In particular, Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati and Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari reveal the relationship between history, cultural memory, and national consciousness through their literary representations of Joymati's sacrifice, moral determination, and political resistance.

Cultural Representation of Joymati and National Consciousness

The social significance of historical events and figures depends not only on their place in the past but also on how they are remembered, interpreted, and represented by subsequent generations. From this perspective,

Joymati occupies an important position in the construction of Assamese cultural memory. Her determination and sacrifice amid the political struggles of the Ahom kingdom gradually acquired cultural significance through their association with courage, moral responsibility, devotion to duty, and ideals of womanhood. Her historical memory has subsequently been reconstructed through literature, drama, commemorative festivals, and other forms of cultural representation.

In this context, Barua and Lal's (2021) research article, History, Memory and Legend: Contextualizing Joymoti Utsav in Assam, is particularly relevant. The authors examine Joymati's historical memory and the socio-cultural significance of Joymoti Utsav, demonstrating how her character became closely associated with Assamese national consciousness and women's social participation during the early twentieth century. In particular, the introduction of Joymoti Utsav in 1914 helped bring Joymati's historical identity into the sphere of collective memory while contributing to the construction of cultural narratives concerning national identity and ideals of womanhood in Assamese society (Barua & Lal, 2021).

The relationship between this historical context and the two Joymati-centred plays is especially significant. In their literary representations of Joymati, Padmanath Gohain Barua and Lakshminath Bezbarua do not merely reproduce past events. Rather, they construct a particular cultural image of Joymati by associating her courage, sacrifice, and moral determination with socially valued ideals. Consequently, her historical identity extends beyond the personal and political circumstances of her life and acquires new significance as part of the collective memory of Assamese society.

Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory provides a useful theoretical perspective for understanding this process. According to Assmann (1992/2011), cultural memory is preserved and reconstructed through texts, symbols, rituals, and cultural institutions. Through these forms of transmission, past events and historical figures continue to influence the social values and collective identities of later generations. Viewed from this perspective, the relationship between Joymati's historical character and her literary representation is mutually constitutive. While her historical experiences provide the subject matter for dramatic literature, the plays themselves contribute to the reconstruction of the cultural meanings associated with her memory. History and cultural memory are therefore connected through a continuous process of interpretation and representation.

Joymati's cultural representation is also closely associated with the development of Assamese national consciousness. During the colonial period, efforts to establish the distinct identity of Assamese language, literature, and culture were accompanied by a renewed interest in Assam's history and cultural heritage. In this intellectual environment, the heroism, political struggles, and sacrifices associated with the Ahom period became important subjects of literary expression. The representation of Joymati as a figure of moral courage and cultural pride in the two plays may be understood in relation to these broader concerns of the period in which they were written.

Nevertheless, the cultural idealization of Joymati reveals a significant tension. Her representation as Mahasati, or an ideal and devoted wife, has given her sacrifice a distinguished moral status within Assamese collective memory. At the same time, such representations may partially obscure the political significance of her independent decisions and resistance to royal authority. As a result, Joymati's historical identity is constructed simultaneously as that of a woman who resists political oppression and as a cultural embodiment of conventional ideals of womanhood.

A New Historicist approach makes it possible to examine this dual representation through the interconnected processes of history, power, and cultural ideology. It raises important questions about the social values through which Joymati's sacrifice has been idealized and the extent to which her individual agency is acknowledged within that idealization. Her cultural representation must therefore be examined not merely as the preservation of a glorious historical memory but also as a process shaped by ideological assumptions, power relations, and particular constructions of femininity. Such an approach allows for a more critical understanding of Joymati's position in Assamese historical and cultural consciousness.

Socio-Political Context of Literary Production and the Reinterpretation of History

Although historical drama draws its subject matter from a particular period in the past, its literary construction cannot be separated entirely from the socio-political environment in which it is produced. When playwrights represent historical events and figures, contemporary social ideologies, cultural values, and intellectual concerns inevitably influence their creative interpretations. From this perspective, Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati and Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari need to be examined in relation to the literary and cultural environment of colonial Assam.

Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati (1900) and Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari (1915) were published during a significant period in the development of modern Assamese language and literature. Questions of linguistic identity, historical pride, national consciousness, and cultural self-awareness occupied an important place in Assamese literary discourse during this period. Consequently, the literary reconstruction of historical events and personalities may be understood as an important means through which a sense of cultural identity was articulated and strengthened.

From a New Historicist perspective, two distinct historical periods intersect within these plays. The first is the seventeenth-century political environment of the Ahom kingdom, characterized by struggles for power and political instability. The second is the colonial Assamese society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, within which the historical events surrounding Joymati were reconstructed as dramatic narratives. The relationship between these two periods is not one of simple reflection. Rather, the playwrights select, reorganize, and reinterpret historical events in ways that connect the past with the literary and cultural concerns of their own time.

In this context, Montrose's (1989, pp. 15–20) concepts of the historicity of texts and the textuality of history are particularly relevant. These concepts suggest that literary texts should not be understood merely as reflections of past events but as cultural narratives produced within specific historical circumstances. Although Joymati's experiences belong to the political history of the seventeenth-century Ahom kingdom, her dramatic representations are shaped by the moral values and cultural consciousness of colonial Assamese society.

In both plays, Joymati's sacrifice is presented not only as a consequence of political persecution but also as an expression of marital devotion, a sense of duty, and moral determination. Through this idealization, the historical event acquires new cultural significance for the society in which the plays were written. In Gohain Barua's Joymati, particular emphasis is placed on Joymati's courage, devotion to duty, and the representation of ideal womanhood. In contrast, Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari more explicitly associates her character with religious and moral values, marital devotion, and cultural ideals. These differences reflect the distinct ideological perspectives through which the two playwrights reconstruct the same historical event.

However, this literary reconstruction of history cannot be separated from relations of power. The selection of particular historical qualities as exemplary virtues, the recognition of certain forms of behaviour as socially desirable, and the privileging of particular voices within historical narratives are all connected with the operation of social and cultural power. In Joymati's case, courage, sacrifice, and marital devotion are established as cultural ideals, while her independent political decisions and personal aspirations may receive comparatively less attention.

A New Historicist reinterpretation of Joymati's history, therefore, should not be confined to celebrating the achievements and sacrifices of the past. It must also examine the social ideologies, structures of power, and limitations of female representation embedded within historical narratives. From this perspective, Gohain Barua's Joymati and Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari can be understood not only as literary reconstructions of Ahom history but also as important cultural narratives that participate in the construction of Assamese identity and ideological consciousness during the colonial period.

CONCLUSION

A New Historicist analysis of Padmanath Gohain Barua's Joymati and Lakshminath Bezbarua's Joymati Kunwari reveals the complex relationship between the literary reconstruction of history, political power, and the representation of women. In both plays, the historical events surrounding Joymati are not presented merely as dramatic reproductions of the political circumstances of the past. Rather, they acquire new literary and cultural meanings through the playwrights' creative perspectives, ideological positions, and the socio-cultural consciousness of the periods in which the works were produced.

The analysis demonstrates that Joymati's character embodies a significant intersection of personal duty and political resistance. Her decision to protect Gadapani and her determination to maintain that decision despite political pressure and physical torture reveal both her moral strength and her capacity for independent judgment. In this sense, Joymati is not merely a passive participant in historical events. She emerges as an active female figure whose decisions influence the course of political developments.

Nevertheless, Joymati's resistant agency remains closely connected with traditional ideals of womanhood. In both plays, her courage and sacrifice are represented through the values of marital devotion, pativrata dharma, and ideal femininity. Consequently, her characterization reveals a dual representation in which female agency coexists with patriarchal ideology. When examined through the New Historicist concepts of power and resistance, this tension suggests that although Joymati's decisions challenge the intentions of royal authority, her resistance is subsequently incorporated into established social and moral ideals through literary representation.

The comparative analysis also reveals important differences in the construction of Joymati's character. Gohain Barua's play places particular emphasis on her courage, devotion to duty, and exemplary womanhood, whereas Bezbarua's representation more prominently reflects religious and moral ideals, marital devotion, and cultural values. These differences demonstrate that the same historical figure may acquire different meanings depending on the playwright's literary perspective and the ideological consciousness of the period in which the work is produced.

Another significant finding of the study concerns the construction of cultural memory and national consciousness. In both plays, Joymati's sacrifice extends beyond the sphere of personal experience and becomes associated with the collective memory and cultural identity of Assamese society. She is consequently represented not only as a historical

woman but also as a cultural symbol of courage, moral determination, and sacrifice. However, this process of idealization may also partially obscure certain aspects of her independent political position and individual identity. It is therefore more appropriate to understand Joymati not simply as an idealized figure of womanhood but as a multidimensional female subject whose representation is shaped by the interaction of history, power, and cultural ideology.

Overall, the study argues that the reconstruction of history in Assamese historical drama is neither neutral nor fixed. Rather, it is deeply influenced by the playwright's creative vision, contemporary social ideologies, and cultural circumstances. Drawing upon the New Historicist perspectives of Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose, the analysis of the two Joymati-centred plays highlights the interrelationship between political authority, resistance, female agency, and cultural memory in the literary representation of history. The principal contribution of this study lies in its attempt to move beyond the conventional image of Joymati as a self-sacrificing woman or an ideal wife and to reconsider her as an active historical female figure whose independent decisions and moral determination challenge the exercise of political authority.

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