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Voices of Resistance: A Philosophical Exploration of Feminism in Assamese Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Assamese poetry, a vibrant tradition rooted in centuries of cultural and political evolution, serves as a philosophical crucible for feminist resistance, challenging the ontological foundations of patriarchal oppression. This paper examines the works of Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi, Sananta Tanti, Nilim Kumar, Chandraprabha Saikiani, and Anuradha Sharma Pujari through existential, phenomenological, ethical, and postcolonial lenses, exploring how their poetry interrogates questions of being, freedom, and embodied experience. By weaving personal struggles with collective critiques, these poets dismantle gendered hierarchies while addressing intersectional oppressions of caste, class, and regional identity. Their verses transcend literary expression, offering a profound philosophical inquiry into human dignity, agency, and the ethics of resistance within Assam's socio-cultural context. This study underscores the transformative power of poetic resistance, illuminating its contributions to both Assamese literature and global feminist thought.

KEYWORDS: Assamese poetry, feminism, existentialism, phenomenology, postcolonialism, ethics, intersectionality, agency, patriarchal ontology, regional identity, resistance, embodiment

INTRODUCTION

Assamese poetry, with its origins in the esoteric Charyapadas of the 9th–10th centuries, is more than a literary tradition—it is a philosophical arena where existential, ethical, and phenomenological questions of human existence are negotiated. Within this rich tapestry, feminist voices emerge as radical interrogations of being, challenging the patriarchal ontologies that define and confine women's identities. Poets such as Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi, Sananta Tanti, Nilim Kumar, Chandraprabha Saikiani, and Anuradha Sharma Pujari wield poetry as a mode of ontological rebellion, resisting not only societal norms but also the existential alienation imposed by gendered oppression. Their works grapple with profound questions: What does it mean to be a woman in a world shaped by intersecting oppressions? How can poetry serve as an ethical act of resistance? Through a philosophical lens, this paper explores how these poets employ language, imagery, and narrative to construct feminist discourses, weaving personal struggles with broader critiques of gender, caste, class, and regional identity. By situating their resistance within Assam's unique socio-cultural

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landscape, they contribute to a global feminist philosophy that celebrates agency, embodiment, and the transformative power of the poetic act.

Discussion:

Historical Context: Poetry as Philosophical and Postcolonial Inquiry

Assamese poetry has evolved through Assam's tumultuous history, from the Bhakti movement's spiritual introspections to colonial subjugation, the Assam Movement (1979–1985), and ongoing struggles for ethnic and cultural identity. Each era has imbued the tradition with philosophical depth, reflecting on the human condition amidst socio-political upheavals. The Jonaki era (1889–1900), marked by romanticism and poets like Chandrakumar Agarwala, introduced an introspective focus on human emotions and nature, laying the groundwork for existential reflections later adopted by feminist poets. The post-independence Ramdhenu era embraced modernism, aligning with phenomenological explorations of lived realities, including gender disparities, and ethical critiques of

social injustices. From a philosophical perspective, Assamese poetry can be seen as a postcolonial endeavor, negotiating the tensions between indigenous identity and colonial legacies. The Assam Movement, while centered on ethnic and linguistic preservation, prompted poets to reflect on women's roles in collective struggles, raising existential questions about authenticity and freedom in a region marked by cultural hybridity. Feminism in Assam, catalyzed by figures like Chandraprabha Saikiani, was not merely a social movement but a philosophical stance against the dehumanization of women, challenging the colonial and patriarchal frameworks that marginalized Assamese women's voices. Feminist poetry thus emerges as a space of existential and ethical resistance, blending regional particularities with universal concerns about human dignity and agency. This dual engagement—local and global—positions Assamese feminist poetry as a unique contribution to postcolonial feminist philosophy, where the act of writing becomes a reclamation of selfhood and a defiance of imposed silences.

Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi: Existential Resilience and the Ethics of Ambiguity:

Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi (1932/1933–2004), a Sahitya Akademi Award winner, imbues her poetry with existential reflections on human suffering, resilience, and the search for meaning in a gendered world. Her collections, such as *Sudirgha Din Aru Ritu* and *Bon Faringar Rang*, explore themes of love, loss, and societal critique through a feminist lens, informed by her personal struggles—an early marriage at age 11 and the challenges of single motherhood. Bordoloi's poetry aligns with existentialist philosophy, particularly Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the ethics of ambiguity, which posits that human freedom is realized through creative acts of resistance against oppressive structures. Her verses portray women not as passive victims but as beings-in-the-world who navigate existential despair to assert their agency. In her poem "Dawning," Bordoloi writes, "Does the day break / With the sound of guns? / Not at all. / It breaks with the cry / Of that bird / Which nibbles through / The night's darkness / Very slowly." This imagery evokes an existential metaphor: the bird, embodying women's quiet persistence, nibbles through the ontological darkness of patriarchy, asserting its being through incremental acts of defiance. The slow, deliberate act of "nibbling" suggests a phenomenological engagement with time and embodiment, where resistance is not a singular event but a lived process of becoming. Bordoloi's poetry also engages with ethical questions, protesting social ills like dowry and gender-based violence

while celebrating the moral imperative of hope. Her lyrical style, rich with natural imagery, reflects a pantheistic worldview, where women's resilience mirrors the cyclical renewal of nature, offering a feminist reimagining of existential authenticity. Philosophically, Bordoloi's work challenges the patriarchal reduction of women to the "Other," a concept Beauvoir critiques in *The Second Sex*. By portraying women as agents who create meaning through their struggles, Bordoloi constructs a feminist existentialism that is both personal and collective, making her a pivotal figure in Assamese philosophical literature. Her poetry invites readers to reconsider the ethical dimensions of gendered existence, urging a commitment to justice and solidarity in the face of systemic oppression.

Sananta Tanti: Intersectionality and the Phenomenology of Labor:

Sananta Tanti (b. 1952), a poet from the tea garden working class, brings an intersectional feminist philosophy to Assamese poetry, addressing the compounded oppressions of caste, class, and gender. His collections, *Mur Nirjan Saponar* and *Dhuliyori*, reflect the lived realities of tea garden women laborers, whose existence is marked by economic exploitation and gendered marginalization. Tanti's poetry aligns with feminist phenomenology, particularly the work of Sara Ahmed, who emphasizes the embodied experiences of marginalized bodies in oppressive systems. His verses vividly capture the physical and emotional toll of labor, rendering visible the invisible struggles of women workers. In lines like "The tea leaves whisper / Of hands that bleed in silence," Tanti evokes a Heideggerian sense of Being-in-the-world, where women's labor is both a mode of existence and a site of existential alienation. The "bleeding hands" symbolize the phenomenological weight of gendered and classed embodiment, where the body becomes a battleground for capitalist and patriarchal exploitation. Tanti's ethical stance, reminiscent of Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of responsibility for the Other, demands recognition of these silenced voices, urging readers to confront the moral implications of systemic inequities. His intersectional feminism challenges the universalizing tendencies of traditional feminist discourse, insisting that true resistance must account for the pluralities of oppression. From a postcolonial perspective, Tanti's poetry critiques the colonial legacy of tea plantations, which entrenched caste and class hierarchies in Assam. By centering women laborers, he reclaims their agency, portraying them not as passive victims but as resilient beings who endure and resist. His work underscores the necessity of an intersectional

feminist philosophy, where liberation is inseparable from economic and social justice. Tanti's poetry thus serves as a philosophical call to solidarity, bridging the personal and political in a vision of collective emancipation. Nilim Kumar: Subversive Ontology and the Politics of Desire.

Nilim Kumar (b. 1961)

A contemporary poet, employs a subversive feminist philosophy in collections like *Oxygen Cylinder* and *Aphrodite*, challenging the patriarchal ontology that confines women to prescribed roles. His poetry explores themes of desire, identity, and societal constraints, portraying women as complex beings with autonomy over their bodies and choices. Kumar's bold imagery confronts Assam's conservative norms, raising existential questions about freedom and authenticity in a society that commodifies women's sexuality. In "Oxygen Cylinder," Kumar writes, "She breathes through a tube / Society's verdict on her lungs," a stark phenomenological depiction of women's constrained existence under patriarchal surveillance. This imagery resonates with Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of bad faith, where societal norms force women to deny their freedom by conforming to prescribed roles. Kumar's feminist resistance lies in reclaiming this freedom, celebrating women's agency over their desires and identities. His ecological metaphors, linking women's exploitation to environmental degradation, further broaden his philosophical scope, suggesting a holistic ontology where human and natural liberation are intertwined. For instance, in *Aphrodite*, Kumar parallels the desecration of rivers with the societal control of women's bodies, evoking a feminist philosophy that aligns with Vandana Shiva's critiques of patriarchal and capitalist exploitation. Kumar's subversive approach also engages with postcolonial feminist thought, questioning the imposition of Western gender norms on Assamese women while critiquing local patriarchal traditions. His poetry challenges the binary of tradition versus modernity, portraying women as agents who navigate these tensions to assert their ontological freedom. By blending eroticism with social critique, Kumar constructs a feminist philosophy that celebrates desire as a site of resistance, making his work a provocative contribution to Assamese literature.

Other Voices: Chandraprabha Saikiani and Anuradha Sharma Pujari:
Chandraprabha Saikiani (1901–1972), a trailblazing feminist and poet, used her literary platform as an ethical and existential act of resistance. Her poetry, though less voluminous than her prose, reflects her activism, addressing issues like widowhood, caste

discrimination, and women's rights. In poetic adaptations of her short story *Daibagyar Duhita*, Saikiani critiques patriarchal practices, portraying women as defiant beings who reclaim their narratives. Her work embodies a philosophy of praxis, aligning with Hannah Arendt's concept of natality, where each act of resistance births new possibilities for justice. Saikiani's feminist philosophy is grounded in the lived realities of Assamese women, challenging both colonial and indigenous patriarchies to assert their right to exist authentically.

Anuradha Sharma Pujari (b. 1964), a contemporary novelist and poet, explores the existential dilemmas of urban women in works like *Meru Mithu Meru*. Her poetry delves into the phenomenological tension between societal expectations and personal authenticity, reflecting the fragmented selfhood of women navigating modernity. Pujari's introspective feminism aligns with Iris Marion Young's phenomenology of gendered embodiment, which examines how women's bodies are shaped by social norms. In her poem "Cityscape," Pujari writes, "The city binds her feet / Yet her heart wanders free," evoking the existential struggle to reconcile external constraints with inner freedom. Her work highlights the psychological and social challenges of urban women, making her a vital voice in modern Assamese feminist philosophy.

Philosophical Themes: Resistance, Agency, and Intersectionality:

The feminist poetry of these Assamese poets converges on existential, ethical, and phenomenological themes of resistance and agency. Bordoloi's lyrical resilience reflects an existential struggle for meaning, portraying women as beings who create their essence through adversity. Tanti's intersectional focus demands an ethics of solidarity, emphasizing the embodied realities of marginalized women. Kumar's subversive imagery asserts ontological freedom, challenging patriarchal control over women's bodies and desires. Saikiani and Pujari ground their resistance in activism and phenomenological introspection, respectively, highlighting the diverse modes of feminist rebellion. Intersectionality is a recurring thread, particularly in Tanti's poetry, which challenges the homogeneity of feminist philosophy by addressing the pluralities of caste, class, and gender. This aligns with Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, which underscores how overlapping oppressions shape women's experiences. Environmental metaphors, evident in Kumar and Bordoloi, evoke a holistic phenomenology, linking women's liberation to ecological harmony and reflecting Assam's agrarian

context. From a postcolonial perspective, these poets navigate Assam's regional identity, weaving feminist critiques with cultural pride, thus grounding their resistance in local realities while engaging universal themes of freedom and dignity. The philosophical richness of their work lies in its ability to transcend the personal-political binary. By portraying women as agents who resist existential alienation, these poets construct a feminist ontology that celebrates embodiment, agency, and the ethical imperative of justice. Their poetry becomes a performative act of world-making, to borrow from Judith Butler, where new possibilities for gendered existence are imagined and enacted.

Conclusion

Assamese feminist poetry, as articulated by Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi, Sananta Tanti, Nilim Kumar, Chandrababha Saikiani, and Anuradha Sharma Pujari, is a philosophical rebellion against patriarchal ontologies and colonial legacies. Their works explore existential questions of being, ethical imperatives of resistance, and phenomenological realities of gendered embodiment, while addressing intersectional oppressions and regional identities. By blending lyrical beauty with philosophical depth, these poets enrich Assamese literature and contribute to global feminist and postcolonial thought. Their verses challenge us to reconsider the nature of human

dignity, the ethics of solidarity, and the transformative power of poetic resistance. Future research could explore how younger poets extend this philosophical legacy, further diversifying the existential, ethical, and phenomenological narratives of feminist resistance in Assam's literary landscape.

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