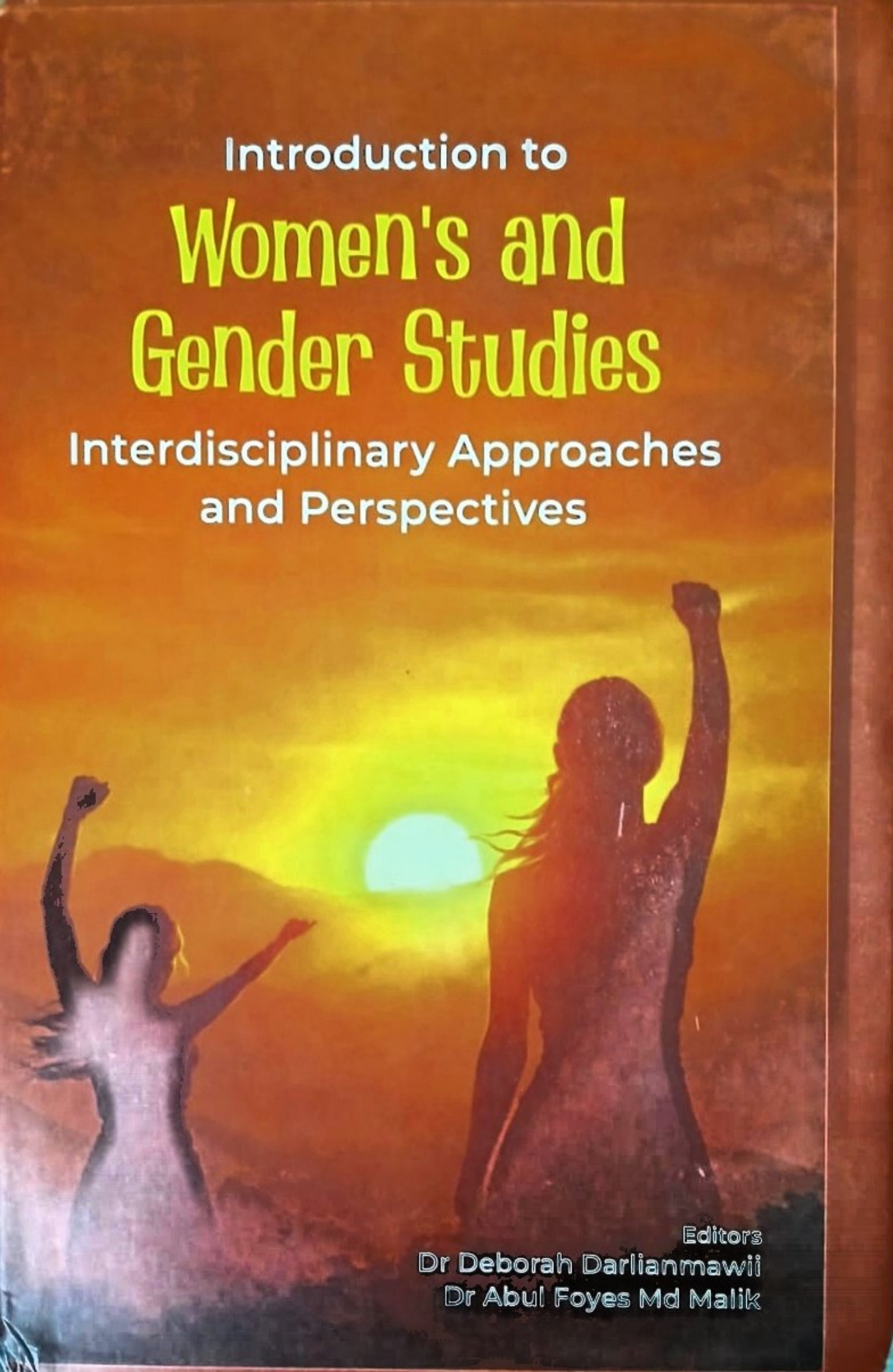
Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies

Interdisciplinary Approaches and Perspectives



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Collaboration and Conflict: Indigenous Elites and Missionary Efforts in Female Education in Colonial Assam

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Introduction

The emergence of female education in colonial Assam was a gradual and multifaceted development shaped by the interaction between Christian missionary efforts and progressive sections of Assamese society. Before the British annexation in 1826, there was virtually no system of formal education for women in the region. Prevailing social customs confined women to domestic responsibilities, and literacy among girls was generally discouraged. With the establishment of British rule, Assam encountered new administrative structures, cultural influences, and intellectual currents. The growth of colonial governance and infrastructure, the activities of the American Baptist missionaries, and the broader impact of the Bengal Renaissance together stimulated a socio-cultural awakening in the Brahmaputra Valley during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Colonial authorities regarded education as part of their "civilizing mission," intending to cultivate a class of educated intermediaries loyal to British interests. Initially, Western-style education in Assam was limited to boys, while girls remained excluded due to patriarchal norms, child marriage, and restrictive traditions. Christian missionaries, especially the American Baptists, were instrumental in founding the first girls' schools. Their efforts combined literacy training with religious instruction, seeking moral and social reform. Although these initiatives opened new avenues for women's education, they also provoked suspicion and resistance, as many feared cultural loss and religious conversion.

This study examines the role of Christian missionaries in initiating and promoting female education in colonial Assam, while also analyzing the views and contributions of indigenous Assamese elites. It explores



REFRAMING WOMANHOOD

DISCOURSES, IDENTITIES AND RESISTANCE

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