

Rewriting Marginality: Rereading Women In Select Assamese Short Stories

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Abstract

It is generally seen that women constitute part of the margin of Indian culture, and pertinently that in North-East India, which again exists on the socio-political margins of our big country. Needless to acknowledge that women's constraints and capacities are found to be equally trans-cultural. The interest of this article is focused on representation of women in the short story writings of Assamese writers who are of respectable standing in the literary scene of this region. The stories selected are not to be construed as representative samples; nevertheless, these are a range of powerful short stories written by major Assamese authors in our modern times. In these stories women characters are portrayed as central to the story lines. Most of them are perceived as self-conscious individuals confronting or answering the prevalent social norms that suppress or exploit them physically, socially and morally.

Keywords: Seduction, education, predetermined, bondage, freedom

Introduction:

Generally, women constitute part of the margin of Indian culture, and pertinently that in North-East India, which again exists on the socio-political margins of our big country. It is needless to acknowledge that women's constraints and capacities are found to be equally trans-cultural. The interest here is focused on representation of women in the short story writings of Assamese writers who are of respectable standing in the literary scene of this region. The stories selected are not to be construed as representative samples; nevertheless, these are a range of powerful short stories written by major Assamese authors in our modern times.

The stories undertaken for analysis are the following: 1. *The Decision* by Syed Abdul Malik [1919-2000]; 2. *The Journey*, 1998, by Indira Raisam Goswami [1942-2011]; 3. *The Cavern*, 1969, by Bhabendra Nath Saikia [1932-2003]; 4. *A Nymph in the Desert* by Arupa Patangia Kalita [1956-]; 5. *Parable of an Ancient Triangle*, 1998, by Moushumi Kandali []; 6. *A Game of Chess* by Saurabh Chaliha [1930- 2011]. The stories taken for analysis are selected from a handy collection of Assamese short stories as entitled *A Game of Chess*. 2009.

Modern Education and New Consciousness:

Modern Assamese literature has developed immensely with influences reaching through English literature and Western studies since the British Rule. One involuntarily recalls Hem Barua's statement underlining this 'history of a new growth under the impact of Western literature'. Modern Assamese short stories too evidence this creative impact, and some story writers dexterously adopt postmodern thought even. Women characters as viewed in the stories are found moving through domains which look socially realistic and simultaneously imagined. Thus, their identities are both intricately constructed to seem natural. In *The Decision*, Aimoni, the 25-year-old female protagonist is positioned against Kusha Phukan and Ratneswar Kharghoria. The story is organized on the basic oppositional structure with a woman at the center. The main interest works out the life-journey of Aimoni in a male-dominated social order. From 'a stern self-denying decision' [i.e. to remain a spinster] she comes round finally to a settled life by marrying a teacher who is a widower and father to two kids. She is shown as a woman who can take her own decision, which would subvert the custom-ridden notion of woman's helplessness and dependence. In contradistinction to her, so many other girls are ready like 'gopies' to oblige Kusha Phukan all sorts of 'rasleela' [p.6]¹. In a society of economic inequalities and needy hands, the man of fortune has every opportunity of exploiting his objects of desire. Aimoni could stand her ground by not falling a prey to the wealthy man's seductive stratagem; and in this portraiture, the writer has put to fine use the ideals of socialist ideology and liberal individualism. Further, she rises from the margin, and the margin is made not to be a sacrifice for the society's central power interests that Kusha Phukan represents in terms of his influential self-image weighted by his wealth.

However, one could recognize the fact that Aimoni's belated decision to marry at last is not voluntary, not decided by a free will. She could have remained free all her life from society's marital bondage, if she were resolute. It seems, marriage is rather her circumstantial alternative to the patriarchy's pressing demand: for her status as a woman to be respectably earned is socially predetermined, and this social recognition is not to be dismissed casually. Love or spirit of

independence alone does not decide life's final score. She is driven to choose between two suitors, and so her stern self-denying decision signifying her freedom and individuality is crumpled. She only negotiates her womanhood within the socially defined and culturally determined boundaries of man-woman relationship.

This needs to be emphasized however in that story that Syed Abdul Malik the esteemed writer has successfully portrayed the individual aspirations of a woman beleaguered by life's constraints, and that the social milieu of Assam has been nearly recreated to support the character's decision. One feels Aimoni's character is admirable not as being a heroic person so much in refusing the advances of wealth, but as coming to terms with the best available choice of marriage, not without some share of love, in a culturally constrained situation and reality. One feels even in this short story Malik's socio-cultural art being shaped by the Chekhovian dramatics of creating an atmosphere for individual feelings. This atmosphere is contextually a social situation in which the woman is presented (Chekhov 47-60)

"The Journey" narrates a day's return journey from Kaziranga to Guwahati. The locale is particularly resonant with problems currently affecting Assam –displacement, daily poverty, terrorism, helpless love, and life degraded from riches to rags. Nirmaali's mother is often called 'an old hag' by her husband who is privileged as having historical memories and preserving cultural icons. Nirmaali, the daughter, is called 'miserable pest' by her parents and even 'slut' by her own absconding brother [Kanbaap] who is the darling of the mother. Both the mother with her lost heritage and the daughter with her uncertain present are minor portraits, least sympathetically drawn, who are truly marginal voices. These characters are not the focus of Raisam Goswami's story, and in this portrayal, the society is recaptured in its usual indifference toward women in general. When Malik has consciously presented liberal fillip to woman's emerging individuality, Raisam Goswami, a woman herself and recognizably a strong feminist voice, seems to have restrained herself from making any conscious constructions about the women's world, at least in this story. But the story may be identified as containing on a miniature scale unmistakable shades of the author's central preoccupations evident in her longer fictions.

This short story reminds us at least tangentially by a tinge of the more inhuman silencing of women as of the widows depicted in her novels *The Blue Necked Braja* (1976) and *The Worm Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*. In the silent suffering figure of Nirmaali in a volatile situation, the reader could suspect some identical strains of Goswami's own gloomy depression. The author herself confessed that she poured her depression on paper to keep on life going, and by transferring into the sorrows of others her own to produce short stories at first available chances. The socio-economic condition of Nirmaali's aged parents in the story revealing the feudal decadence and cultural degeneration could well recall the subject of *The Worm-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*.

This present short story is also structured by binary positions of characters: local boys do not like Nirmaali for having an affair with a soldier who is obviously an alien and a terror symbol to the people in a state of terrorist imbroglio. Kanbaap loves the path of terrorism [an alien mode] and leaves home but is loved and awaited dearly by mother. Children of both sexes are not equally loved in a patriarchal system; and the mother is drawn as a foil to the father figure. Further, the idea of love may be delightful in a stable society; but in a state of cultural confusion and political hardship, it is by no means sane. Hence who sides with love is spurned and muted. In this atmosphere of insecurities, the writer has tried to merge her frustrations in sensitively championing a memory of heritage as a redeeming prospect.

The most important issue raised here is about culture, which now is in its stages of degeneration. The political turmoil in the story could indicate Goswami's abiding interest in culture and its calamitous times, which her *In Pages Stained With Blood* related on the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. The woman writer Goswami, unlike a feminist here, inducts a male character for the ambassador of culture. Another dimension comes to our view, that is, women occupy the margin of this cultural order, and they do not signify to inhabit a unified domain; in other words, they are much disparaged against, while they themselves disparage against one another. Quite interestingly, the more enlightened woman, coincidentally the writer herself, belonging to the same culture, plays the role of an onlooker in the story with a sympathetic mind turning toward the serenaded loss of former traditions. All the women's state points to the complexity of a wider society. *A Nymph of the Desert* positions a character Shobha, a model as against Emily the doctor: both happen to be old friends. There is an attempt to equally distribute literary space and interest between the two distinct territories. Shobha rises from the margin defined by poverty, desire, illness, family compulsions. Her desperation to earn a good living, even through some fallen ways, is sympathetically drawn. To her, morality and food, modeling and doing business with the body are one; health and social respectability are consequent to the quantum of money one possesses, for this is the power mode of transformations everyway. On the contrary, to Emily who is born rich, real beauty is in good health [p202]. Some might find her confusion of perspectives or values in the name of social recognition and women's liberation; but I would appreciate her forthright exposure of dehumanizing poverty, since her self-respect is overwrought by social inequalities and lack of adequate avenues for freedom.

One is aware of the women feminists throughout the world how they reacted against the Cartesian belief as a force to perpetuate exploitive systems. The feminist 'views subjectivity as unstable, fragmented and socially mediated' and 'knowledge' as 'characterized by inherent sociality and contingency, which cast doubt upon any possibility of a one-to-one correspondence to the objective world.' (Kuiper 78)

The involved problematic reflects back on the society, the same society, which breeds extremes- aristocracy of the mind and cynicism of a dehumanizing physicality. The same society creates space for Emily's profession [service to others] and Shobha's modeling [self-serving], but one profession is privileged over the other. Further, Indian society cannot adequately redress the desert life, which dreams and waits in the waste land for a shower to rain colors around, and which weaves color patterns in worn cloths to cover the naked body with. Here, the margin where various women characters are presented is complicated; and the morale of the margin is tilted in favor of Emily with flashes of sympathy of course left for Shobha, who but dwindles into a decaying shoot of the margin though with a moment of colorful glowing. Her difference from the desert women, thought both classes suffer from poverty, consists in her education, individual daring and social ambition. Shobha reminds us of Gauri *pehi* [auntie, father's sister] whose time passed in nursing her ailing mother in Kalita's story "The daughter, the wife and the mother," and the force of fortune deciding men's shifting sympathies.

The author chooses a locale outside the North East and challenges an indifferent patriarchy with women's problems and perceptions by sustaining our interest with some audacious exposition of the darker realms of passion. One feels to ask why a bold presentation of Shobha leaves her stunted finally. The writer may have decided to draw a limit to the territory of aggressive feminism in Indian society. An Indian feminist but conservative writer, it seems apparent, cannot tread too radical a line; and the feminist author, Arupa Patangia Kalita, makes the desert women remember Emily as a nymph of charity, whereas Shobha is lost and forgotten in her adventure into the world of showbiz whose master is Mr. Forge of Paris. Nevertheless, Shobha, the lost soul, pulls on masculinists a few radical punches and conscientious cringes as well, which strongly support the writer's position as a feminist. Emily could only shed her helpless tears with no wand ready within her control to ward off all the desert ills, and rightly so, as a nymph she once alights from a different domain into the midst of desert women and returns there. As a nymph she cannot ameliorate the human hurts deep in Shobha or in desert life. It is of course powerfully revealed in the story that jealousy kills the jealous mind, but poverty kills everyone.

On the basis of the three short stories, a general pattern emerges that short story does greatly involve a contested space among many valid or assumed positions, ideologies, values, and viewpoints. Reality of a fictional world as dealt with tends to undermine the traditional notions based on universal truth and unchanged meaning, which are actually constructed in a male-dominated social milieu and which always serve power relations of the higher in hierarchy. The writer does not, probably because cannot, present the actual as it at least seems real on the surface, since she is herself involved on various levels in the process of creative production.

Our further probe into *Parable of an Ancient Triangle* projects failure of the self-proclaimed feminist who is possessive yet humanly frail at heart but radical in rhetoric, got into a tangle involving Saraju Baideu a teacher, Benimaadhav a painter, and the female author's mask a school girl. The school girl under tutelage of the feminist teacher has been learning a new 'vision of the lust' for life with the help of feminist books. The feminist teacher endorses the bohemian in a male [Beni Maadhav] but would not tolerate a slight unwomanly transgression in a female who might emerge as her competitor for the same bohemian. Kandali could delve deep into the female psyche and throw fresh light on delicately concealed niches. Subhojit Bhadra has characterized Kalita's fictions by 'intertextual modes', which 'tease the intellectual and imaginative faculty of her readers' (Bhadra, no pag). This observation may even sound apt in respect of her short story as the one under consideration. It is rightly stated on the cover of her *A Tale of Thirdness and Other stories* [Delhi: Sanbun, 2009] that '[h]er handling of the erotic is mature, her symbolism fresh, her style enchantingly lyrical and profoundly meditative'. However, what one could not critically appreciate, here in this particular story, are a host of images showered all at once, such as small blots in Maths; Baideu as the ground under the railway track and the school girl as a blade of grass growing beside it; platinum in sulphuric acid; in Maths zero added or multiplied to a number, etc.

An observation is due however. The images are sophisticated, potentially poetical, but handled with the least careful craftsmanship. All metaphors but pour down only on the last page, and more than this, these images get to rush through a teenager school girl's head without prior associations, least hinted at, for eventual authentication. Without any of these extraneous metaphors, the story would have emerged as an eminent feminist piece as it indeed is. One may ask, if the author-persona is the blot Baideu wants to erase, why does she bequeath a range of feminist texts to the persona? The feminist ambiguity is apparent here. On the other hand, this event would also reassert those texts and writings remain with their power of thought and concepts after the author's demise. Art has a life beyond the author's control of its

material, which the reader's response unfolds. Search for liberation seems to be an adorable goal howsoever difficult and unrealizable.

There is one very powerful story written by Bhabendra Nath Saikia which falls beyond the category of Indian society and Indian women. We do not expect to meet another Menoka, the lead woman in *The Hour Before Dawn* [Penguin: 2007]; nonetheless, the woman character in *The Cavern* drawn from a Western country does prove a stereotype that *west or east; women are a category of the least*. *The Cavern* tells a racially sensitive story portraying Mary who is not a fully drawn character except in the role of a shy beloved female. The humanistic interest of the story conflated with a postcolonial discourse ignores specificities of the locale. One could easily guess the locale is any part of the south in the USA. Mary the black woman is stereotypically identified as having a face with a thick, wide lower lip, a broad nose, prominent cheek bones, and 'the color of her skin...' [Saikia 25]. Her life operates only between love and death, for a figure on the margin usually does not understand messy power politics. The dotted space in the story is left blank for *black*, which is intolerable a color, so unrecordable in the view of a white politician; secondly, by this artistic stroke to foreground a meaning more powerfully, the author reveals his own ideological sympathies, because *black* could have been normally printed, but the printed suggestion would have lost its political intent.

The author is interested in dramatizing the black/white divide, and has portrayed a deeply entrenched white prejudice against the black. Racial politics scores against scientific facts. Circumstantially, Mr Peiner a political heavy weight of the white race has to receive a dead black's heart; the medical operation turns out to be a wonder success. The event has all the potency, in socio-political terms, of a black-white harmony, but eventually turns out portentous. Mary a black woman, usually invisible and inconsequential a figure, appears almost suddenly out of this black/white conflict, an all male affair, and gets subsumed under its more violent perspective. Her womanly love is apparent in her yearning to hear Smith's heart beat in the white man's chest. As the plot moves to a climax, she pleads: 'Keep my Smith alive.' May the heart of a deceased black tick on privately and invisibly inside the white man; this is a permissible limit. But the fatal wrong is the woman of the dead black, Mary, who is the immediate witness to this intrusion of black benevolence into the white domain; and privately, she is so happy, without understanding the appalling political implications of her being as innocent evidence. She is killed by Mr Piener. Here again, culture with its prejudices asserts its own power relations that structure human identity and psyche. So, she needs to be silenced at the gun point. Significantly, the white man gets smothered in the dark night, which is symbolically as dark as the black race. The whole atmosphere involving the incidents is kept to the murky, sordid, and dark hours as significantly as is the dingy politics of the day.

One can mark here the position of science has been feminized in a sense that the status of science and the [black] woman are uncongenially but equally made marginal and dispensable. Finally, the dominant group of power maintains reason or unreason for its own vested interests. Next morning, Dr Campbell is asked to sign a statement- "hearts of all races do not match bodies of all races"- which is to keep alive the dogmas about the superior white race. This inequity is artistically staged on the doorstep of a state, loudly democratic, priding on scientific reason, objective truth, and equal justice. The author has consciously chosen a place outside India and intellectually explored the paradoxes inherent in that domain.

Can one race live in complete elimination of the other? The story's postcolonial answer is loud. The appeal: 'Keep my Smith alive' rings throughout socially and politically signifying that the black and white cannot have separate futures, one's death will lead to the other's demise inevitably. The voice of the woman, of nascent love and reciprocity between races, and the voice of reason, i.e. medical science, are silenced by or sacrificed to the racial dogma. There are too many deaths in this short story as indicative of such mishaps in American history. The short story otherwise affirms a point that Saikia, a regional Indian writer endowed with intellectual and creative capacities (Bezboruah no pag), can adequately and powerfully handle the foreign material.

Chaliha's "A Game of Chess" brings to open the conflicting drama of the psyche in a chess player. This see-saw drama of jealousy, anxiety and voyeurism, all of man's unrealized self, centers on two women who do not speak a word in person, nor do they appear physically in the story. This situation of course delicately signifies the patriarchic family structure where the women are really made invisible and silent, and ironically unaware of men's fantasies and frustrations moving around them. Remarkably, Chaliha's mode of presentation is subtle and psychologically teasing and entertaining. Chess is a mind-game, but here, the mind's shadow game, a game of the self's ghostly drives and instincts, has dexterously been played to achieve a status of art. In this sort of art, women are felt as more powerful apparitions possessing the male world entirely than their open and visible characterizations. The borders between the mind and art are overlapping in this short story. The author is somehow as interesting as his conceived characters and their situation. While alive Chaliha would stay away from the limelight even if it relates to his award-winning ceremony in recognition of his merit.

One would find that inequities- cultural, racial, religious, moral, political, etc- strongly influence and motivate an author. The author is an interventionist, he/ she is moved to restructure a society, which would remove such inequities and conflicts or answer in setting right an unsatisfying reality, and more so when women are the focus of the story. Short story does greatly involve such a contested space among many valid or assumed positions, ideologies, values, and viewpoints. Reality of a fictional world as dealt with tends to undermine the traditional notions based on universal truth and stable meaning, which are actually culturally produced and which always serve power relations. As Michelle Foucault has said:

"Truth" is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it. (Foucault 74)

A deconstructive lens would allow the reader to uncover the fissures and gray spots hidden in the story. She would create or deploy symbols and images as to bolster her own imagined equation, to authenticate her avowed position in the fictional world. Thus her language cannot remain free from ideology. Raisam Goswami's language in the story is deliberately kept simple to effect a panoramic feel of culture, while the style of Kalita is consciously shaped on feminist premises. No doubt, Saikia's mode of presentation is politically nuanced. There is nothing called one natural mode for presenting all kinds of reality and all kinds of discourses.

The writer does not, probably because cannot, present the actual as it seems real on the surface. She exploits the resourceful structure of the binary bind. She cannot do without the awareness of 'the other' which stands in opposition to her sympathized or promised 'one'. The politics of her writing is to empower the oppressed or marginalized. As Clark and Ivanic say, "[...] the power of writing also means that writing gives access to power over others in terms of being able to influence the ideas and lives of others".... 'power and status interact ... [so] difficult to separate them out' (Clark 36). Nevertheless, the margin is not a single, unified domain; it is a complex arena where differences among the marginalized are a daily experience.

Conclusion:

Mostly, a false notion of authority is offered in writings to the oppressed or suggested about the oppressed. Since the oppressed remains under oppression in actuality, the virtual authority does not solve anything, stories but merely transcend oppression, assuage hard feelings, offer an aesthetic purgation of emotions. Nevertheless, the oppressed is given some space, even as one evokes for our cynicism Auden saying: 'Does poetry make anything happen?' or Gayatri Spivak 's 'Can the subaltern speak?' If realities are presented in writing, the self-reflexive nature of writing complicates true presentation. An author cannot remain an impartial, universal observer, like Emerson's transcendental eye-ball. Writing would mask more than unmask the actual, or deflect more than reflect interests in the real. Critical reading makes available uncertainties and aporias in the story which are but fine tuned to the author's ideological discourse. Then, the obvious question arises: Should we write or not write? One answer however lies in a question: Should we speak or not speak? Man cannot do without this. As human society is a network of our dialogic relationships, the dynamic of this network needs to be maintained. And writing reinforces this dialogic, which cannot be undone. These writers under consideration have spoken their mind, though their final stable truth is debatable. And one agrees that these are only contingent truths available.

Notes:

1. Rasleela: symbolizing Lord Krishna's playful equanimity with the maidens of Gopa called Gopis at the same time. The textual expression is satirical in intent demeaning the womanizer.

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