



AGENCY AND RESISTANCE: WOMEN'S VOICES IN COLONIAL ASSAM

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Abstract

Re-presentation enables both women writers and lives of women become a kind of resistance against the established system to reclaim their denied positions in society. Today, in India, we are always reminded of the heroic exploits of the freedom fighters while the names of women martyrs remain scattered. After much deliberation, today, in the context of the colonial woman, she is always read and re-read to analyse her 'self' and her 'voice'. Women in colonial India are also not devoid of speculations, especially because of the retrieval of the lives of so many remarkable women who left their mark in the society. Assam, too, is not bereft of the women who were able to assert their individual self, but they are still under-represented and need to be unearthed. It is through the recent writings and work of women like Tilottama Misra, Aparna Mahanta, Sheela Bora, Meeta Deka and Shiela Borthakur, and the laudable efforts of the Asom Lekhika Samaroh Samiti and Lekhika Santha that we are today aware of the women in colonial Assam who need to be placed in history and situated in their rightful locations for their remarkable contribution towards Assamese society. Therefore, this paper would be an exploration of Swarnalata, Theng Phakhri, Abhiyatri and Mereng as historical texts and their mediation through a feminist framework.

Keywords

Re-Presentation, Historical Texts, Feminism, Colonial Woman, Assamese Women, etc.

Full Article

Historical novels are not repetitions of history, but a re-presentation of particular events of history that has a direct relation with the present. The author presents a realistic picture of the social and cultural life of a particular age through portrayals of various characters. Shehla Burney in her article "Re-doing the Narratives of Empire" defines representation as "the means by which society re-presents itself" (Burney, 61). She further defines re-presentation as:

the ability to represent ourselves in our own words, through our own voice, to have the power to name, the privilege to write ourselves into the national script and to tell our own stories in our own image. It is a means of writing culture, an inscription, a trace, a replay, which manifests itself as another way of seeing the past/present. Re-presentation is a mode of resistance for the subaltern, minorities, women and natives. It is a form of power that disenfranchised voices can deploy to construct knowledge about themselves, to retrieve, reclaim, and reassert their lost identities and "re-do" the narratives of their lives (Burney, 64).

So, while "re-doing" the narratives of lives through historical novels there is an obvious ignorance of women writers: women writers remain scattered in the accounts of the historical novels. They are explicitly ignored by Lukacs as unaccountable and deal with Scott as the precursor of the



historical novel. Referring to recent work of the 1990s that claim the recovery of women writers who preceded and influenced Scott, Diana Wallace argues that Scott,

explicitly distanced himself from these female forerunners, most obviously in the preface to *Waverley*, and masked or played down the extent to which he was indebted to them, a move which positioned him as the father of the historical novel and ultimately of the nineteenth-century realist novel. It was therefore Scott himself who set the line followed by subsequent critics, who either saw him as being without a maternal genealogy or lauded him for rejecting it (Burney, 9).

Re-presentation enables both women writers and lives of women become a kind of resistance against the established system to reclaim their denied positions in society. Today, in India, we are always reminded of the heroic exploits of the freedom fighters while the names of women martyrs remain scattered. The process of retrieval arose when the needs to record women's history and preserve the existent records started with the 1975 Indian women's movement (Mahanta, 1). After much deliberation, today, in the context of the colonial woman, she is always read and re-read to analyse her 'self' and her 'voice'. Women in colonial India are also not devoid of speculations, especially because of the retrieval of the lives of so many remarkable women who left their mark in the society. The contribution of so many such women like Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde towards women's emancipation is something to be reckoned with. Relentless efforts of scholars like Geraldine Forbes, Partha Chatterjee, Lata Mani and Tanika Sarkar have brought to the fore the 'unsung' and so far, the 'silent' women in colonial India, and made all the difference in women's history perspectives.

Assam, too, is not bereft of the women who were able to assert their individual self, but they are still under-represented and need to be unearthed. It is through the recent writings and work of women like Tilottama Misra, Aparna Mahanta, Sheela Bora, Meeta Deka and Shiela Borthakur, and the laudable efforts of the Asom Lekhika Samaroh Samiti and Lekhika Santha that we are today aware of the women in colonial Assam who need to be placed in history and situated in their rightful locations for their remarkable contribution towards Assamese society. They inform us, for example, about the activities of Assamese women in the beginning of the twentieth century that led to the establishment of the Assam Mahila Samity in 1926. The Samity consolidated the women of Assam and facilitated them to participate in the freedom movement in Assam. Aparna Mahanta claims that it brought under its umbrella, women from the rural areas for which it became distinct from the All India Women's Conference (AIWC, 1927) or the Women's Indian Association (WIA, 1917), the elite organizations of women (90). But, before the Samity came into being, a few women in Dibrugarh came together and organized themselves to work for women's education and to extend help to destitute women. They formed the Sevak Mahila Samity in 1915, something that predates the Indian women's collective. Negotiation of history through re-presentation calls for an exploration of lived experiences and the thrust would go to life stories of such historical women personalities of colonial Assam that are no less exciting than fictional characters. Re-presentation of these remarkable Assamese women in colonial times by novelists is itself a new way of negotiating history to establish their significance in present times.

To have a 'voice' is to articulate, and it enables the speaker to let others listen. The colonial woman has always been under the scanner for her apparent absence in the annals of history. The concerned four novels here work upon the "voices" of colonial women in Assam that were earlier unheard of. These "voices" from below were there in writings, but they were either relegated to the side or were just ignored. Tilottama Misra portrays through *Swarnalata* the silent voice of a



colonial woman who was a product of the reformist project in Assam. She is seen always under the tutelage of her father, never transgressing the role of the ideal woman. She received an education because her father wanted so, entered marriage for her father wanted so and remarried as a widow, again, for her father wanted so. Where is her voice then? Aparna Mahanta, in her article *Unabinxa Xatikat Axomiya Nari* (Assamese Women in the Nineteenth Century), claims that Tilottama Misra has never questioned the system of patriarchy prevalent in the society,

Women are shown as independent. But there is no instance of questioning the achievement of men in the society. The grey, long bearded Gunabhiram himself is a patriarchal character. The daughter's love for her father and a wife's love for her husband and also her ever-dependence upon her husband are being shown as ideal. In case of Dharmakanta too, through the projection of new ideals in a husband-wife relation, another symbolic character seems to have arisen out of a new patriarchal system (Trans. Mine, 54).

Swarnalata stands undeterred in the face of such a system and seems to have built up her silence as a strategy for her survival. Her power to check any kind of abjection can be perceived in her stand to control the reins of the household after her mother Bishnupriya's death.

Swarnalata's aristocratic upbringing and her education at Bethune points out to her being born out of the reformist project. It reminds of *Ghare Baire* by Rabindra Nath Tagore where the colonial woman Bimala is asked to emulate the 'modern' woman in spite of her disapproval. Swarnalata does not disapprove the 'offered' role of the 'modern' woman, but strategically uses silence to prevent any kind of trespassing into her individual space. Her inner mind remains 'uncolonised' like Sunity Devi, the princess of Cooch Behar, who in her autobiography,

...glosses over the social issues that were attracting the attention of the reformers. There is not a mention of the debate over widow-burning or the Age of Consent Bill which had sparked off a nation-wide debate around the time recorded in the autobiography. Sunity idealises almost every aspect of the Indian 'tradition', including child marriage and the purdah system. Despite her westernized lifestyle in England or in the hill stations of India, she observed strict purdah in Cooch Behar (Misra, 108).

The author Tilottama Misra has carefully moulded Swarnalata's silence as having deeper meanings. The readers are diligently led to see the other side of the unspoken that uncovers the individual self of the colonial woman who is aware, and always assessing her surroundings.

Self-assertion and consciousness of the colonial woman is evident in the character of Theng Phakhri too. She seldom speaks in the novel, and the individual woman who emerges within her is delivered through her actions. Mamoni Roisom Goswami has meticulously drawn the image of Theng Phakhri through the limited sources available and is justified in being proud as informed by Dr Hiren Gohain,

Mamoni was quite proud with *Theng Phakhri*. She wanted to portray a hardworking tribal woman of great personality belonging to that period when the Bodos were looked down upon and discriminated against. During that time the British gave recognition to Theng Phakhri's skill, bravery and boldness. She was appointed a British tehsildar. The



historical authenticity of this has been questioned. But it is deeply rooted in Bodo folk belief (Gohain, 10).

Theng Phakhri's actions deliver the most powerful of her voice that left even her closest confidante, her grandfather, stunned. Tribhuvan Bahadur was in a state of shock to discover Theng Phakhri being an ally of the anti-colonial activities while he, all the time, nurtured the belief that he could read her mind.

Theng Phakhri's decision to go against the British in spite of being loyal to the British all the time is the clear indication of the emergence of the conscious individual in a colonial woman. She has close affinity with Sunity Devi, the princess of Cooch Behar, who had been so loyal to the British government in India that she writes in her autobiography – "Our religion of the New Dispensation teaches loyalty to the Throne. This loyal feeling is a sacred duty to me, and in the whole of India no family is more loyal to His gracious Majesty than the Cooch Behar Raj family" (Sen, XX). While we see Sunity Devi's consciousness dawning upon her quite late in her life, Theng Phakhri is seen to be quick enough to comprehend the darker designs of the British in her homeland.

The 'silenced voice' of the colonial woman is re-presented by Nirupama Borgohain in her novel *Abhiyatri (The Traveller)* (1993). Chandraprova Saikiani, an extraordinary woman who withstood the harsh realities of life with her strong personality and voice of protest, would have remained lost in the annals of history if, as I have mentioned earlier, Pushpalata Das would not have brought her to notice. It is through *Abhiyatri* that she got a new lease of life with her lived experiences coming alive. Chandraprova is seen since her childhood as one who always stood for the rights of a person. She would always raise her voice for equal opportunities for women and at a very young age she started a school for girls in her village. Her education in the Nagaon Mission School stands out as the turning point in her life, who goes on to be a school teacher and subsequently devoting herself to the nation's freedom struggle.

Chandraprova's single-motherhood and her consequent effacement by the person she loved, not to speak of the society as a whole, has been delineated by Borgohain in a resounding manner that makes way to question the status of women. Thwarted by all she is almost in the verge of losing her self-esteem,

She is a wretched girl who has lost everything, but those respectable men of the society who are leading a complete and contented family life with wife and children, with all their youthful desires fulfilled, why did they come knocking at my door to lure me? They are not at all guilty of any crime, they live in the society with all respect, for they are men and I am a woman, a hated being, who is never to be forgiven for any wrong doing of young age (Borgohain, 69).

The support of her parents and her ability to overcome any fallout in her life, Chandraprova moved on to become a stronger woman who is conscious and confident. She becomes an active participant of India's freedom struggle and is responsible for consolidating the women's movement in Assam through the formation of the Assam Mahila Samiti in 1926. Aparna Mahanta records in her *Journey of Assamese Women*:

The mass mobilization of women through the Assam Mahila Samiti in the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties was undoubtedly a major factor contributing to women's large scale participation in the freedom movement in Assam. Though middle-class and upper middle-class



women from elite political families were prominent in Mahila Samiti Organization, seeing it as part of the nationalist effort, the work of Chandraprova Saikiani among the rural women helped to give it a mass character which made it quite different from contemporary elite national women's organizations in India like the All India Women's Conference (AIWC, 1927) or the earlier Women's Indian Association (WIA, 1917) which were mainly organizations of educated urban women (Mahanta, 90).

In *Abhiyatri (The Traveller)*, the author has very skillfully drawn out the emotional and powerful call that Chandraprova delivered upon the women sitting behind a bamboo fencing at the Nagaon session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1925 (Mahanta, 95).

To instill an awareness and acceptance of the fact that the colonial women were not silent, but made silent by patriarchy is what many of the twentieth century postcolonial writers attempt in their works. Maitreyee Chaudhuri argues,

At one time 'Western-located Indian' feminists decried the fact that Indian feminism was "self-effacing", that Indian woman see their personal desires as unnecessary and were engrossed with larger questions such as questions of community identity, democratic citizenship, religious beliefs, workers' rights, cultural distinctions, and rural poverty. The question that western feminisms would ask and we would echo: "Where amidst this din of large issues were the women?" (Chaudhuri, 22).

She further claims that "the widespread circulation of Partha Chatterjee's nationalist resolution of the women's question in global academia appears to have truly wiped out the story of political action and resistance of Indian woman" (Chaudhuri, 27). So, the need to explore and interrogate the other side of 'silence' that can be read as agency and resistance of the colonial woman. That simple strain of resentment Tanika Sarkar found in Rassundari through *Amar Jibon* (Sarkar, 111) is enough to decode Swarnalata's questions popping in her mind and relating them to her situation.

The apparent portrayal of Swarnalata as the signature image of the colonial woman often leads critics to question her individuality. Niranjana Kalita, in his *Axomiya Jibonibhittik Upanyas (Assamese Biographical Novel)*, argues that Tilottama Misra has failed to develop Swarnalata's personality in her novel (Kalita, 220). He further claims that the author, enamoured by Gunabhiram's family, seems to have taken the opportunity to idolize Swarnalata (Kalita, 220). Here he fails to recognize Swarnalata's resentment in being "the new model of domesticated, but educated Indian women" (Chaudhuri, 25). Misra has meticulously drawn the uneasiness of Swarnalata when she experiences practically the rubbing of shoulders in the aristocratic society: "Swarnalata, surrounded by memsahibs, was ill at ease to eat with forks and spoons. Gunabhiram had already readied his daughter to face such a situation. She was taught for a month to handle such a situation when she would have to eat with forks and spoons. Such arrangements were made so that she can make herself comfortable in any kind of circumstance in Kolkata" (Chaudhuri, 81). This alludes to the fact that the social reformers recasted women to be, as Maitreyee Chaudhuri calls, "creatures of domesticity".

The image of "domesticated, but educated Indian woman" is shattered when the character of Theng Phakhri is explored in the novel *Theng Phakhri Tehsildar or Tamor Toruwal (The Copper Sword of Theng Phakhri Tehsildar)*. Her skills in horse riding and with the sword prompt the British to appoint her as a tehsildar. "The legacy of women revolutionaries, trade union



activists, and nationalists is as much part of the historical legacy that the independent Indian state inherited” (Chaudhuri, 27). Theng Phakhri would have remained an oral narrative, and it was Mamoni Roison Goswami who brought to the fore and re-lived the legendary Bodo woman through fiction. The apparent picture of Theng Phakhri in the novel would suggest the popular notions of women’s political participation as an outcome of male dominion. Theng Phakhri is seen first working for the British as tax collector, and then accepting and embarking to join the freedom struggle. What Goswami wants to convey through her portrayal is the emergence of consciousness in the colonial woman – an agency which is so individual. Hoping to see some kind of reaction in Theng Phakhri, Maclinson once said,

We will protect your beautiful land. All obstacles will be removed. Haven’t you heard? Aren’t the Portuguese loitering here apart from the local enemies? Three of them were caught recently – they say they came to hunt. We are keeping a watchful eye on Bhutan. You don’t know when they will come and destroy this land. Theng Phakhri, your beautiful land, your exclusive land! (Goswami, 49)

Such provocation was all in vain – this is the ultimate realization of the conscious woman who through her silence ‘speaks’ of her agency.

The ‘silence’ that Theng Phakhri ‘speaks’ is not the same for Chandraprova in *Abhiyatri* (*The Traveller*). She is the fiery woman who has a ‘voice’, but subdued. As quoted earlier in this chapter, Chandraprova seems to have been wiped out of women’s political participation as a result of Partha Chatterjee’s notion of nationalist resolution of women’s question (Chaudhuri, 27). It can be sorted out as an effect of ‘new patriarchy’ for she was not the ideal image of a woman in the Nationalist project, “To resist the cultural onslaughts of the West and articulate one’s own cultural identity it became all the more important to project an image of womanhood, which would symbolize both the strength and distinctiveness of Indian tradition” (Chaudhuri, 28). Being disillusioned with the inner workings of the Congress, Chandraprova leaves the party to join the Socialist party to again re-join Congress (Saikiani, 310) which speaks about her integrity that was honoured, “After that Chandra was taken by surprise and made emotional when she was nominated by the Congress party as a candidate from Bajali for the 1957 election” (Saikiani, 311).

Maitrayee Chaudhuri gives an instance of the re-fashioning of women today by saying that, “when reformers sought to introduce women’s education to make good, modern, bourgeois mothers, the structural opening up of university education for women brought in its turn the entirely unanticipated entry of women into the public sphere” (Chaudhuri, 28). Anuradha Sarma Pujari provides such an “unanticipated entry” by portraying Indira Miri in *Mereng*. The contemporary society was not yet ready to accept wholeheartedly women’s education or even mixed marriages. But what *Mereng* brings forth is the changing perception that can be seen in Indira Miri’s father Sonadhar Senapati. He gives importance to Indira’s education and makes it a point to see that she gets an education that would never make her conscious that she is different because she is a girl (Pujari, 78). It is also important to note the kind of support that Indira’s father extended for her after her husband Mahichandra’s death. She was sent to Edinburgh for higher studies when people back home, still hesitated to send their daughters to school. Nevertheless, Indira’s zeal and integrity to spread education in the wilderness of the erstwhile NEFA still remains unparalleled.

The various ways of re-presenting the ‘silent’ voices are an act of resistance of the established notions of the absent colonial woman. They seek to establish the self-identity of the

colonial woman who has been stereotyped as being suppressed by patriarchy. These novels extend a kind of power to retrieve and reclaim the lost lives.

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