



Women in Colonial Assam: A Study of Select Postcolonial Assamese Fiction

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Abstract

Fiction being a popular medium to reach out to the masses turns out to be a kind of alternative history which is more interesting and appealing. It is indeed a *fait accompli* of many of our postcolonial novelists in re-presenting the women in colonial Assam through their works. This paper is an exploration of the texts and contexts associated with the re-presentation of the colonial Assamese women by Mamoni Roisam Goswami, Tilottama Misra, Nirupama Borgohain and Anuradha Sarma Pujari in their selected novels *Theng Phakhri Tehsildaror Tamor Taruwal (The Copper Sword of Theng Phakhri Tehsildar)* (2009), *Swarnalata* (1991), *Abhiyatri (The Traveller)* (1993) and *Mereng* (2010) respectively. It seeks to establish that these writers have made a significant exploration of colonial Assamese women as transmitters of culture and bearers of change thus offering an alternative perspective that challenges the traditional views of women's role and agency.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Colonial Women, Historical Fiction, Re-presentation, Agency.

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" (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 (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. 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 (Mahanta¹). 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, '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 Samity 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.

Scholarly works no doubt contributed significantly to shape women's history, but have they reached *en masse*? Does such scholarship appeal to the non-academicians? Fiction being a popular medium to reach out to the masses turns out to be a kind of alternative history which is more interesting and appealing. It is indeed a *fait accompli* of many of our postcolonial novelists in re-presenting the women in colonial Assam through their works. This paper is an exploration of the texts and contexts associated with the re-presentation of the colonial Assamese women by Mamoni Roisam Goswami, Tilottama Misra, Nirupama Borgohain and Anuradha Sarma Pujari in their selected novels *Theng Phakhri Tehsildaror Tamor Taruwal (The Copper Sword of Theng Phakhri Tehsildar)* (2009), *Swarnalata* (1991), *Abhiyatri (The Traveller)* (1993) and *Mereng* (2010) respectively. It seeks to establish that these writers have made a significant exploration of colonial Assamese women as transmitters of culture and bearers of change thus offering an alternative perspective that challenges the traditional views of women's role and agency: "Instead of accepting feminine identity as natural and essential, historians and other social scientists treated it as constructed. This liberating hypothesis stimulated questions

about women's unequal position" (Forbes 2). This 'constructed' history of women is further re-presented through fiction and thus provides an alternative way to comprehend the predicament of women today.

Maitreyee Chaudhury argues, "The context within which concepts emerge and the contexts where they travel to, needs enunciation" (35). Colonial women in Assam were articulate in spite of their apparent 'silence'. Their 'silence' is a consequence of the male-dominated historical set up that always kept them in the periphery. A whiff of fresh air came for women in Assam with the arrival of the British in 1826 that allowed new ideas to come in. But their 'absence' from the annals of history was such a marked chapter that 'absence' itself turned out to be a significant 'presence'. So, subverting the myth of the colonial woman having no voice, a retrieval process was initiated with the little bits of histories available. The authors of the selected texts explore and represent the colonial woman in Assam. Each of the authors presents distinctive images of the colonial woman linked together with the thread of agency and resistance.

The lived experiences of Swarnalata, Theng Phakhri, Chandraprova and Indira Miri have enabled the authors Tilottama Misra, Mamoni Roisom Goswami, Nirupama Borgohain and Anuradha Sarma Pujari to represent and interrogate history. The delineation of the characters is the retrieval of the absent women who stood steadfast with their agency and resistance. Swarnalata, the signature image of the colonial woman, is the epitome of a silent crusader of women's emancipation. Her apparent image of a passive woman, a "father's daughter", belies the individual self inherent within her. She confronted every calamity that came across after the death of her parents to safeguard the future of her brothers along with the responsibility of her daughters. Her agency and resistance comes clear when she says to Dharmakanta about taking up writing again - "... Nowadays, I don't feel like writing. My

only task today is to educate my three brothers and my two daughters. Mother has left me with this responsibility in her death-bed. There is no time to think of myself" (196 Trans. Mine). At a time when women were subordinated, Swarnalata stood strong and her lack of time for herself resounds to provoke our minds to re-read the colonial woman.

If the colonial woman was kept silent that silence itself becomes the power for her that she uses to assert herself. The silences of Theng Phakhri and Indira Miri speak volumes of their respective actions that bound acknowledgement of their presence. Their power to establish self-assertion stands in contrast to what Gillian Beer claims -

The problem of the relation between the centre and the periphery has remained in the favoured discourse of the feminism and the left. The danger is that we may begin to welcome positions ascribed to us, and then find ourselves unable to move from them. Proper resistance leads to the 'oppositional mode', to alternative readings and to a celebration of the periphery. The list of inhabitants of the periphery becomes a carnivalesque group - the mad, the poor, women and workers - who are idealized as outside the power centre. Such idealization of the 'deviant mode' leaves its inhabitants powerless and may perpetuate exclusion (83).

Theng Phakhri and Indira Miri are both a "celebration of the periphery", but they are neither "powerless" nor do they "perpetuate exclusion". The authors Mamoni Roisam Goswami and Anuradha Sarma Pujari have chalked out their respective protagonist as the pan-Indian presence with an image that assimilates both the national and the regional - both are portrayed as the horse-riding self-assertive women carrying their respective traditional attire with élan.

If Swarnalata, Theng Phakhri and Indira Miri established their self-assertion with their calm and composed demeanour, Chandraprova Saikiani was, in that matter, a complete deviation. She transgressed the traditional role of the colonial woman and spoke when she was supposed to remain silent. Nirupama Borgohain had to depend little on imagination to bring out the self-assertive in Chandraprova who was not a "voiceless" rebel. She is the woman Cixous looks out for, who, she argues, will "change the rules of the old game" (103):

If woman has always functioned 'within' man's discourse, a signifier referring always to the opposing signifier that annihilates its particular energy, puts down on stifles its very different sounds, now it is time for her to displace this 'within', explode it, overturn it, grab it, make it hers, take it in, take it into her woman's mouth, bite its tongue with her woman's teeth, make up her own tongue to get inside of it. And you will see how easily she will well up, from this 'within' where she was hidden and dormant, to the lips where her foams will overflow" (101).

These four figures of the colonial woman in Assam not only assert their individual identity, but also as markers and transmitters of culture they have accentuated to the constructed gender roles in the society. They are a part of the larger dream that Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain presented in *Sultana's Dream*. Here, it is pertinent to quote Sangeeta Ray who claims her reading of *Sultana's Dream* as "an intervention and a reminder" and observes that "the construction of a female subject in a given sociohistorical moment can also operate as a *mise en abyme* of the larger political problematic. The narrativisation of this political scenario demands a normative locus if it is to succeed. Woman becomes the site of this obsession with the norm" (125). Swarnalata, Theng Phakhri, Chandraprova and Indira Miri – they all initiate

to self-reflect and awaken the women who are lulled into sleep with, as observed earlier in this work, "the pan Indian notion of the iconic woman-mother-goddess figure who is both revered and simultaneously burdened with the responsibilities and roles thrust upon her with regard to family, the upkeep of tradition and social mores".

One very interesting question that Maitreyee Chaudhury raises is about the Right to Equality and the Right to Freedom of Religion of the Indian Constitution. She argues, "Can a State which proclaims opposition to discrimination based on sex...permit religious personal laws, which affect the life of women in a basic manner?" (30). The colonial woman who was vulnerable to the religious personal laws had to face subjugation and mutability. The colonial women in the novels studied here had to overcome the social norms to acquire power that provided an aura around them for others to look up to them.

The re-presentation of the colonial women in the concerned novels is a part of the historical process of which the reader too becomes a participant. As a result, we can perceive the predicament of women today who enjoy much of the independence that the colonial woman had to struggle for. When women like Swarnalata, Theng Phakhri, Chandraprova and Indira Miri strived to establish their self-assertion, the social mores were too rigid and not conducive for a woman. Geraldine Forbes, in regard to educated colonial women in the nineteenth century, claims –

By straining for new lives, these "new women" learned where the boundaries were and just how far they could go. But this was a dynamic process; women were becoming educated and then becoming the educators. The boundaries of the early nineteenth century had been stretched considerably by the early twentieth century. What was deviant behavior for one generation was acceptable behavior for the next (62-63).

Swarnalata belongs to the cusp of modernity when the social reform movement had just arrived in Assam. She had to work out with the limited resources or opportunities available at the time with ample support from her father all the time. Sculpted by the social reformer in her father, she inculcated an inquisitive mind that enabled her to acquire an understanding of herself as an individual. In a different purview Theng Phakhri emerges as a strong voice of self-assertion within her silence. Working as a *tehsildar* under the British she carried out her job with ease not with raised voice, but with no voice at all. People looked at her with awe, but could never read her. Her individual disposition is made visible time and again in the novel to keep the reader on suspense as to what Theng Phakhri is up to. Her decision to jump into the freedom struggle surprised even her closest of aide, her grandfather Tribhuvan Bahadur. So, how can we foreclose the agency and resistance of the colonial woman?

The voice of the colonial woman is loud and clear as we come across Chandraprova Saikiani. She is vocal enough to reach out and motivate the women across Assam to initiate a women's movement for the first time. At a time when women were not expected to break the sanctity of a woman, let alone raise her voice, Chandraprova protested every attempt of subjugation. Nirupama Borgohain never felt the need to depend upon fiction to bring out the self-asserting colonial woman. In contrast to Chandraprova, Anuradha Sarma Pujari's Indira moulded her own individual identity by her little talk. She never had to raise her voice to be heard, but every word she spoke was so convincing that everyone was ready and eager to carry out every order of her. Her delineation is itself a re-living experience in the jungles of NEFA.

So, as we explore these four colonial women of Assam who struggled to find the individual within themselves in different contexts, the question confronts us as to how far

we have progressed since them? Rhonda Y. Williams' observation regarding the keepers of oral narratives is relevant for the writers Tilottama Misra, Mamoni Roisam Goswami, Nirupama Borgohain and Anuradha Sarma Pujari too who have written women's lives as women writers:

The Voice, then, enriched the tale, provided missing cues, and unveiled multiple layers of knowing and subjectivity.... One can hear and see the anger, the pity for stupidity, the resistant will, the lethargy, the insecurities, and the nostalgia... Conducting close readings of speakers' styles - the what and how said - provide yet another avenue - one potentially much more complex and richer than a "just the facts, ma'am" approach - to understanding the relations and perceptions of both the past and present of all our "keepers of information" (63).

Swarnalata, Theng Phakhri, Chandraprova and Indira Miri are seen as breaking the stereotyped image of the colonial woman to emerge as an inspiration for women today. They coalesce with the twenty-first century through the image of a woman who transgresses. Their transgression yesterday has inspired the women today to shed the subjugated state and stand up for an identity for herself. Sandhya Devi, while writing about Assamese women, argues,

Among the educated women today, probably there are a few of them, who still cling blindly to all traditions. Even in the countryside - where the bindings of tradition are rigid - the sound of change is heard. But there are many hindrances in this initial journey of modernity. It cannot be said that women have literally become modern. Because Assamese women are still not free from the shackles of superstitions and man's morality. The Assamese

woman today is the holder of some kind of a split personality. Is the Assamese or Indian man free from such limitations? We are still far from the social and economic conditions that are needed for a complete modern look for the consciousness (42 Trans. Mine).

The pan-Indian figure of the colonial woman in Assam depicted in the concerned novels here, speaks of modern Indian historiography as no longer dependent upon the official archive, but on the "materials in the Indian languages" (Chakraborty3320). The subjects of these four women writers and their preoccupation with the idea of resistance and agency reiterates the immense transition of Assamese women documented within the region's colonial writings and their recovery and representation in a postcolonial moment.

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