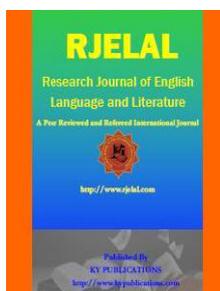




FEMININE SENSIBILITY IN NIRUPAMA BORGHAIN'S *ANYA JIVAN*

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ABSTRACT

Nirupama borgohain is one of the most prominent female voices in Assam. Apart from focusing on other social problems, she highlights the plight of women and their protest against patriarchal values. In her long creative odyssey, she has contributed many powerful novels based on realism where she has consciously dealt with the problem of inequality that exist between men and women in society. Her works are marked by vivid realism and penetrating insight. As a recognition to her unique contribution she was awarded many accolades including Sahitya Academy award for her novel *Abhiyatri* (The Explorer) in 1994.

The narrative of *Any Jivan* powerfully projects the lives of the middle class women in Assamese society. Here the writer examines the opposition women face in determining themselves as individuals having self-identity. Through the protagonist Anima's experiences, the author has made the reader aware that a girl on the verge of entering a new life of domesticity learns about the trauma and subjugation that women encounter in their married households. Moreover, through Anima's eye the narrative focuses on a number of contemporary concerns- that of domestic violence, gender disparity, sexual equality or inequality and class representation as well. The author, through Putali's (another very important character of the novel) character, gives the message that victory does not lie in the subjugation and destruction of the male, rather it lies in bringing them to see the indispensability of each other's space. An attempt has been made in this paper to look into the issue of women's inequality and their struggle for space in society.

Key words: feminine, patriarchy, gender, elimination, inequality, tradition.

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INTRODUCTION

Women writers of North-East India have addressed to gender issues in the regional and national context through their writings where they try to probe deep into the complexity of hegemonic power structure involving patriarchy. In the writings of Indira Goswami, Nirupama borgohain, Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Arupa Patangia Kalita, Reeta Choudhury, Easterine Lulu, and many others

one finds the poignant description of many unforgettable stories of women through which they register their protest against various agencies of oppression. Nirupama borgohain (b.1932) is one of the significant voices among them.

Winner of the Sahitya Academy award for *Abhiyatri* (The Explorer, 1996), Nirupama borgohain is an accomplished novelist, short story writer, and a popular columnist as well. Her literary oeuvre that

include travel writing and children literature & c have attracted the attention of a wide number of readers and many acclaimed critics as well. In fact, she has carved out a niche for herself in the domain of Assamese literature by her unique deployment of situation and themes. As a committed writer she tackles many and varied social issues, but women, who are pushed to the periphery for her gender are her favourite portrayals. Starting her literary career right from her young days, this octogenarian writer is still actively associated with the problems of society in general and women in particular. Being a born rebel and a visionary all along, she is all for a crusade against social inequity. Her works are sincere efforts for the elimination of all man-made disparities between man and man. While taking up the cases of the harassed and the oppressed, she doesn't bow down to any force which proves her unbending spirit. Her contributions are much more than mere literary achievements. She incorporates in her writings her hope for justice and equality that reflect her deep connection with society.

There are many boundaries in a woman's life which have been imposed on her. Although women constitute a huge portion of the total population, they remain invisible and their works and contributions are hardly recognized. However important the function and duties of a woman are, she is always relegated to the background. Following the traditional way of delineating women as weaker sex, they are still identified by virtue of her feminine qualities. Traditionally women's role was defined according to her biological functions. Society expected that women should possess the qualities like submissiveness, docility, virtuousness and beauty. The prevailing patriarchal system perpetrates women to confine to subordinate and submissive role. Because of the influence of the great sage Manu and also the system of patriarchy, society wants to make us believe that there is an essence of femaleness that cocoons all biological women. It is also emphasized that these notions of femininity and femaleness are natural and those who want to violate these societal decrees are subjects of criticism. Social norms and societal expectations of 'how she should behave' stand as a powerful deterrent in a woman's life's journey and

to cross that barrier (may be unjust) is a tough job on her part. The many taboos and narrow social norms constrain her to obliterate her 'Self', her individuality and separate identity. Nirupama borgohain has highlighted this issue in the vast gamut of her novels that include *SeiNadiNirawadhi* (1963), *IpararGharSipararGhar* (1979), *Anyajivan* (1987), *Champawati* (1990), *Abhiyatri* (1992) and so on. The depiction of the lives of different dominating female characters in her novels reveals this fact that a total transformation takes place from her early heroines to the latter ones. Lakshmi, the heroine of *SeiNadiNirawadhi* wants to restart her education and becomes a teacher. But due to flood where her young son was washed away her desire remains unfulfilled. This way Pateswari and other female characters of *IpararGharSipararGhar*, couldn't break the social shackles to establish their own identity. But in *Abhiyatri (The Explorer)*, her magnum opus, the issue of woman's predicament finds a new dimension. This biographical novel draws the trajectory of the unusually bold heroine Chandraprabha who not only fights for her own dignity but also awakens the whole Assamese women regarding their deprived status. As a writer who is branded as a feminist or who herself likes to be called so, it is quite natural that the subject of women's identity would find a wide coverage in her works, but it is in *Anyajivan* that we find a satisfactory feminist novel both thematically and artistically. That is why Prof. G.P. Sarma has rightfully commented that "Nirupama borgohain is the first novelist in Assamese literature who has consciously written feminist novel."¹ Nirupama borgohain's works falls in the category when women writer's search for her own voice and identity as opposed to the identity imposed by patriarchy what Elaine Showalter calls as 'Female' phase. This paper tries to focus on the issue of feminine predicament in this novel.

Objectives of the study

The present paper is conceived with the following objectives --

- To comprehend the position of women in society and to focus on the nature of oppression and domination meted out to women.

- To examine the effort of the female characters to raise their voice of protest against the oppression they are subjected to.

Methodology

The present study has been based on a combination of interpretative, comparative and analytical methods. Critical essays, articles and research based writings on the novels of NirupamaBogohain have been used as secondary data for supporting the analysis.

Discussion

The narrative of *Anya Jivan* begins with the newlywed couple Manoj Dutta and Anima's journey to the bridegroom's ancestral home located at village Sharuphuta in farawayShibsagar district from his (Manoj's) working place Dhubri located in Assam. The idea is to make the bride Anima acquainted with her husband's parents and other family members which would at the same time give her a chance to understand the hard realities of village life.

The journey from the easternmost point of Assam to the westernmost point entails a lot of hardship for the unaccustomed Anima with different modes of conveyance (rail, bus, motor-boat, bullock-cart etc.).In order to keep her husband pleased Anima doesn't show any sign of dissatisfaction in this long and tiresome journey. On their way home they had to cross two rivers-- one the mighty Brahmaputra (the vastness and the beauty of this river always brings a sense of awe and wonder to Anima's mind) and the other an apparently shallow river Tuntuni near Manoj's village. In this context it is significant to bring to mind that in many of Nirupama borgohain's novels the river embodies as a metaphor that symbolizes the life blood of a community. For many of her characters the river appears as a companion with whom they can share happiness and sorrow considering it as the basis of life. In this context the following lines of RajenKalita come to our mind:

"The presentation of river is not just geographical, it becomes a symbol of life in her novels. While the river Pagladiyahas raised uproars in *SeiNadiNirawadhi* and *EpararGharSipararGhar*, Tuntuni flows through *Anya Jivan*.The river becomes

people's companion, sharer of happiness and sorrows, the basis of life; sometimes enraged, unrational demon, (e.g. Pagladiya), a universal flow, a destiny which is indifferent to the sorrows and happiness of our life ...²

Thus,in*Anya Jivan*, rather than being a mere flow/stream, the river pervades the whole novel and penetrates into the lives of the characters shaping their fortunes.

When the couple approaches the river Tuntuni, Anima wants to get down to enjoy the beauty of the river. At that momentManoj has casually remarked that though the river seems to be shallowat that time (it was the month of October), one can easily get drowned even during the winter season. In this context he has mentioned about some "RambhaKhuri"(aunt Rambha), who had committed suicide in that river years ago leaving behind her young girl child. As soon as Anima hears about this incident, she feels perturbed and curiosity starts to haunt herto know the cause of RambhaKhuri's unnatural death. This apparently insignificant incident of some RambhaKhuri's suicide moves the sensitive bride so much that she takes a firm decision to find out the cause of her death. The novelist has successfully built a pleasant story on this theme of an ordinary woman's self-slaughter. Anima's instant reaction has been summed up by the author in the following lines:

Anima gripped the railing with all her strength as if Manoj was pushing her into the water from her behind. An unknown fear made a shiver go down her spine and suddenly the charm of Tuntuni eluded her.³

Right from that time Anima was so much disturbed mentally that she could not stay peacefully until and unless she could find out the reason.In this context Prof. G.P.Sarma's observation is worth mentioning:

"How this apparently insignificant incident strikes the keynote of the novelcan be understood later when we see the bride Anima unravelling the mystery of this suicide."⁴

Thus the news of RambhaKhuri's death plays a significant role in the development of the story. In Anima's inner psyche that small river Tuntuni has

been merged with the death of a woman forever afflicted with sorrow who lost her love for life due to man's cruelty.

Anima's experiences at her in-law's place makes her aware regarding the predicament of women in society. The novelist uses her fine critical acumen and her penchant for provocative views in the narrative. She has made the reader aware that a girl on the verge of entering a new life of domesticity learns about the trauma and subjugation that women encounter in their married households. The narrative tries to place the character's naive yet maturing perspective on the events that catches her attention or comes to her knowledge. She asks questions and probes deep into everyday matters. This is normally not acceptable in a conventional society. In the process she learns and unlearns. Through Anima's eye the narrative focuses on a number of contemporary concerns- that of domestic violence, gender disparity, sexual equality or inequality and class representation as well.

Anima gradually becomes aware of the changing facets of society and matures enough to comprehend the darker and more serious issues related to womanhood. She understands the gendered colourings of the everyday events and ordinary occurrences taking place around her. Her understanding defines gender in a context which is always characterized by the presence of violence. In her in-law's place she often heard the name of a girl 'Putali' mentioned by many on different occasions. As her name was not mentioned in a good sense, Anima too understood her to be a girl of abnormal nature. When one of Manoj's sisters Aikon announced that she will get married only after completing graduation and entering into a job, Manoj's mother, who was quite traditional in her outlook commented that it was because of Putali's bad influence that she (Aikon) had learnt to think so. Later, from Aikon Anima came to know that Putali was the daughter of aunt Rambha. Now she (Putali) grows up to be a young and sensitive girl. Circumstances and experiences of life have brought maturity to her mind and this has been expressed in her words and deeds. Initially being shocked by her mother's unnatural death and her subsequent isolation, Putali grew out to be a girl of peculiar and

exceptional nature. Her hatred for all men alike grew for that reason. But in her isolation Putali is unique and elegant by the knowledge gathered through reading various books immediately available in her village library. Moreover, being influenced by one of her young teachers, Naren, who was a follower of Marxian ideology, she had started to interpret things from a new lens.

On one family function Anima got the opportunity of coming into terms with Putali. Putali revealed before Anima about her traumatic childhood and the cause of her rebellious nature. She says that initially she was against all men alike as she had witnessed the torture perpetrated on her mother by her father. But coming into the contact with Naren, she can understand her mistake and realizes that women's liberation is possible only through the co-operation between both the sexes. Here the author appears before the reader as an advocate of socialist feminism. Through the evolution of Putali's character the novelist traces the journey from fundamental feminism to socialist feminism.

The plight of RambhaKhuri and BihpurianiKhuri (another distant aunt of Manoj who hails from Bihpuria and lives in the same village) exemplifies how the system of male hegemony has taken a toll on women's lives. Unable to bear torture of her husband RambhaKhuri has brought an end to her sufferings through death. From Aikon Anima comes to know how RambhaKhuri's husband dragged her (RambhaKhuri) along the hard surface of the paddy field tying her to the "moi" (a tilling device) which is an extreme form of punishment for a human being. The deep scar mark on Putali's forehead is a constant reminder of her father's torture on her mother. Once, while her mother was feeding her breastmilk, she (RambhaKhuri) was stroke by his leg and in a jerk of the moment she (Putali) was fallen down and got injured by the bar of the bed. Psychically disturbed and terrified by her father's behavior, Putali grows up to be a girl of rebellious nature. This way, Anima learns from Aikon about the painful sufferings of BihpurianiKhuri also. Her husband had married for the second time after ten years of their married life. At that time she was the mother of four children. Because of her

traditional outlook that a woman should remain submissive to her husband she couldn't raise her voice of protest and chose to accept life as it came to her. Her silent suffering makes the reader aware that women are not only treated as subordinate to men but are also subject to discrimination, exploitation, oppression, control and violence in a male dominated society. Her case is an apt example of the helplessness of women where male works as the agency of colonization. In the course of the narrative the novelist has referred to the need of education on women's part for self-dependence.

Putali plays a significant role in making Anima, the highly educated city-bred woman, aware regarding the status and predicament of women in our society. Putali reveals in a confessional note that initially she was a misogynist and had the notion that men as a whole are women's eternal enemies. But Naren had helped her realizing this fact that instead of being enemies men are women's co-workers in the women's emancipation movement. Her remark like "I have inactivated the bomb made against the menfolk" (p.733) and "Nabou (Sister-in-law), nowadays I cannot exactly make them responsible. They are the products of society. Until there is a total change in the norms and conventions of society, the outlook of men of our patriarchal society don't change. So I'm making this bomb ready to fight against the main cause. And we would fight together against the system." (p.732) firmly establish her belief in the co-operation between men and women. In many cases it has been observed that even sometimes men appear as women's rescuers and their voices are much more prominent in making women free from slavery. On the contrary, on many situations women themselves appear as women's enemy. The very common "mother-in-law--- daughter-in-law entanglement" in our society is a case in point. Anima feels a sense of relief after coming to terms with Putali and hearing her confident voice. Putali's character charts the trajectory of the physical, intellectual and psychological growth of the New Woman through her struggle, resistance and success. The author, through Putali's character, gives the message that victory does not lie in the subjugation and destruction of the male, rather it

lies in bringing them to see the indispensability of each other's space.

Thus, Putali marks a bold departure from traditional tracks of patriarchal values and chooses to lead her life according to her own will/dictate. Instead of bemoaning her plight she follows her own path and raises to the level of a New Woman. Her association with Naren opens many new truths and she is awakened to her own qualities which helps her to become a confident woman. She emerges as a woman with enough self-assurance to seek her own identity.

In order to carry forward the discourse of feminism, the writer has strikingly programmed the behaviour and attitudes of many male members in the novel who are otherwise very much enlightened and cultured. For example we can cite the example of Manoj's old and wise father with refined taste and ideal conduct. In taking a decision in any sort of family matters he always considers his opinion is all that counts there. His self-righteousness works as an agent to fix his daughter Aikon's marriage without thinking for any need to know her mind. The sensitive bride Anima observes it and protests. One finds Manoj, the refined gentleman, too, remain indifferent to his mother. Manoj didn't know that his old mother, who took all possible care for him by cooking best meal with her own hands, often took the left overs as her meal. He had to be made aware of this fact by his wife only.

Yet another tale of submission, grief and unhappiness is that of aunt Bihpuriyani. We encounter another male chauvinist in Aunt Bihpuriyani's husband uncle Rajani. The author has introduced him as a person who reads books and periodicals regularly. But this person with refined sensibility too remains indifferent to his wife's inner feelings and for his own pleasure keeps a mistress. Bihpuriyani too, instead of opposing, accepts her lot. All these attitudes of males reminds us of the words of Simone de Beauvoir that men are able to mystify women and this mystification and stereotyping was instrumental in creating patriarchy. Unfortunately, women too accepted this stereotype, and were thus instruments of their own oppression. There is no 'essence' of woman, a woman is 'constructed' as such by men and society.

As Beauvoir puts it: "One is not born, but rather, becomes, a woman."⁵

It is important to note that in *Anya Jivan* Anima's consciousness regarding the predicament of women comes second-handedly. She herself had never been a victim of male-female disparity as she was educated. She was made aware to this issue first through RambhaKhuri's incident and secondly through Aikon and Putali. Aikon appears to be a supporter of women emancipation when she says, "The reality nabou (sister-in-law) is that, the men in our society have formed the opinion firmly over the ages that they are born to master over women. It is as if their birth right." (p.729)

When Anima gets ready to return back to Dhubri, she is completely a matured and enlightened woman. This reawakening definitely gives her an "Anya Jivan" (another life). In her imagination she assures RambhaKhuri in the following way: "Oh, don't grieve, your very own Putali has made the flower of life bloom on the altar of your sacrifice: You never worry about her. I have become a friend to her in her happiness and distress. What more she has found a perfect life partner in Naren! Now do get into your eternal sleep; I won't meet you again, ever. Farewell to you, RambhaKhuri! (p. 744). Thus, the novelist has successfully articulated one very relevant issue through the portrayal of many characters. When their time of leaving came Anima declared in front of Manoj that her short stay in Sharuphuta was so full of events that she feels as if she has spent *another life* in an another era. Initially her disturbance has resulted in her behavior towards her innocent husband Manoj even. When Anima's behavior towards Manoj becomes normal, in a jovial mood Manoj has expressed that at first he thought that Anima has made him responsible for the untoward behavior of all the menfolk towards women. In response to his comment she has significantly remarked, "Yes, at first I became very much excited. But a young girl of the village, a wonderful girl, has taught me that it is not by taking arms against men but by taking hands in hands with men that a successful prevention can be made against men's torture upon women." (p. 744). Thus,

though the novel is set in an interior village, its society can be regarded as a representation of society at large. The author has proved herself as a mastercraftsman by her subtlety of art in examining the opposition women face in determining themselves as individual in a patriarchal set up without using either any evocative language or a fiery one. It is not "écriture feminine", instead, it is "an appealing language with an easy flow that reveals the novelist's fine feeling and an intimate touch".⁶

Conclusion

From the above discussion it can be summed up that a meaningful change in the status of women can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense. For successful realization of her true identity a woman should be aware, strong-willed, self-reliant, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. Eminent scholar Dr. HirenGohain has pertinently observed, "In *Anya Jivan* the author's indubitable faith has been expressed for a future gender free society where women would no more be the beast of burden."⁷ The novel celebrates women's coming together with men as friends and companions and sharers of life rather than as rivals. The novelist offers a solution through an organized movement. On the whole, *Anya Jivan*, with its substantial female experience, definitely carves a place as a novel having feminine sensibility.

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