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ETHNO-NATIONAL CONFLICT AND CRISIS IN ANURADHA SARMA PUJARI'S NOVEL *MERENG*

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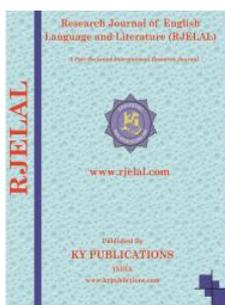
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ABSTRACT

Anuradha Sharma Pujari (born 1963--) a journalist by profession, is an Assamese author of more than eleven novels, four short story collections and more than six autobiographical non-fictions. Editor of both *Sadin* (an Assamese weekly) and *Satsori* (an Assamese monthly literary magazine) Sharma Pujari is well-known for her deep persuasion towards historical causes, socio-political tussles, modernity and humanity. She begins her fictional series with *Hriday Ek Bigyapon* (The Heart's a Showbiz) in 1998. *Nahoror Niribili Cha* (Shadows of Nahor), 2005, *Mereng*, 2010, *Son Harinor Chekur* (Race of the golden deer), 2012, *Nil Prajapati* (Blue Butterflies), 2013, *Jalachabi* (2014) are some of her ground breaking fictions. This paper critically analyses Sharma Pujari's *Mereng* (2010) as an account of a strong woman, Indira Miri and on modern society and its redundant systems. It also unearths postcolonial India's history in the north-eastern context. The pathetic upshot on the easy-going tribal communities of the region arising out of India's governance since independence is also focus of the paper.. The paper, while making a deep probe into the theme of the work, examines how the novelist portrays social realism in the post-independence periods in Assam linking to Indian context through characters and situations. Finally, the work is discovered as a post-colonial discourse.

Keywords: Assamese language, elite suppression, bourgeois domination, ethno-crisis, post-colonial discourse.

Anuradha Sharma Pujari (born 1964--) a journalist by profession, is an Assamese author of more than eleven novels, four short story collections and more than six autobiographical non-fictions. Editor of both *Sadin* (an Assamese weekly) and *Satsori* (an Assamese monthly literary magazine) Sharma Pujari is well-known for her deep persuasion towards historical causes, socio-political tussles, modernity and humanity. She begins her fictional series with *Hriday Ek Bigyapon* (The Heart's a

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sovereigns reserved for the hills. The pathetic upshot on the easy-going tribal communities of the region arising out of India's governance since independence is also focus of the paper.. The paper, while making a deep probe into the theme of the work, examines how the novelist portrays social realism in the post-independence periods in Assam linking to Indian context through characters and situations. Finally, the work is discovered as a post-colonial discourse.

It is worth mentioning that the trend of fictionalization of history in the fictional narratives produced in Assamese in the twentieth century literature is commensurate with frames and ideas of Indian writings in English in the same time frame. Of course, the trend invites readers to an aesthetic surprise with another significant mix of deliberation; and that is, a deep psychological as well as formative probing alongside discovery of lost, suppressed and forgotten historical episodes. India's third generation writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh endeavor to look at events and politics of Partition history through its reconstruction and deconstruction thereby bringing most of the suppressed histories into spotlight. For instance, Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* shows historic nationalistic feelings of the Indians not only connote an atmosphere of patriotism, but also it has been a source of terrifying violence.

With this context, we observe, we are still inept to unearth the essence of fantastic role of the fictional works in India's north-east in respective vernacular languages emerged in the twenty first century and at the closing part of the twentieth century due to our prolonged indifference and negligence. For want of scrutiny with the tools of intellectual movement or perspective, it has also been difficult to determine the motives these works convey through decades. But we are certain that the fictional texts produced in Assamese claim a difference in regard to its historical representation. If some of them faithfully convey histories of border tussles or north-east conflicts, then some of them deal with ancient history of the state or autobiographies of historical leaders. A serious study unfolds the fact that these texts successfully portray

postcolonial reality with all its ugly facts and impressions.

Assamese novelist Anuradha Sarma Pujari's *Mereng* (2010), put up as a historical document, centers round a strong woman named Indira Miri; and her autobiographical accounts expose a strapping wave of ethno-national conflicts in India's history. The work entails a big rhetorical question as to why and why north-eastern region of the country callously falls victim to Delhi's cunning minds and dark faces. Records of administrative coverage in the post-independence periods show a poor rate as it keeps the whole of the region in a cloudy zone.

Although this history-based work on literature pinpoints life-sketch of Indira Miri and her sacrifice for the Assamese race, it clearly shows heinous conflicts between small communities of ancient Assam and bureaucrats of independent India. As the crisis in cultural identity turns hot and tough arising out of ethno-national tussles, the novelist never forgets to make it a document juxtaposing in time unwanted roles of the political people of vested interests. This political problem remains in high focus when the novelist meticulously narrates the life story of educated Miri who made frantic efforts while setting model villages to spread education in such remotest places under the then NEFA (North-Eastern Frontier Agency).

World history carries the fact that often small communities fall victim to prejudicial mind-set of its ruling sections. Due to vested interests of the bureaucrats they remain ruthlessly marginalized. And resultantly they are compelled to wage war or go for revolutionary protest for their socio-economic and cultural equality. History proves that the underlying factors which are responsible for such uprisings are wrong decisions of the governance, dominating attitude of the bureaucrats, disregards towards the small communities etc.

The same conflict plagues the north-eastern part of the country during the postcolonial periods and creates an atmosphere of dissatisfaction. *Mereng* beautifully reflects such conflict. At that time NEFA is the remotest place with high groves having no any transportation

system. The central bureaucrats forcefully impose Bengali language as the medium for instruction for the hills tribes in lieu of Assamese. The most disheartening thing is the Assamese middle classes treat the Bengali people as their linguistic and cultural contestants paying no heed to the formation of Assamese race with the races like Naga, Daphala, Misimi, Oka, serdukpen, hillmiri, Aptani, gelon, monpa, Nisi etc. Even they are proud of Bengali language. Mereng unfolds the fact that the cold war going on between the Assamese and the Bengali fuels a grave cultural crisis since pre-independence periods. The Khasi communities also fall victim to this situation. But Indira Miri, the central figure of the novel, burns midnight's oil in assistance with her model man J. Nehru for bringing peace and amity among various communities there. But the attempt proves futile as gradually a trend of separatist feeling starts growing among the communities. Finally NEFA gets into two fractions—Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. *Mereng* successfully illustrates such cultural chaos from historical point of view and drops its content in a contrast with the European historical records.

The novel, although it is based on biographical sketch of Indira Miri, meticulously knits a narrative of the historical episodes of ancient Assam spanning the period from first decade to the fifth decade of the twentieth century. A total of 19 sequences in *Arunoday* (morning) part, 30 sequences in *Madhanya* (noon) part and 6 sequences in *Gadhuli* (evening) part of the novel encompasses hot-blooded relationships between the Hindus and the Brahmins, role and attitude of British high officials, idiosyncrasies of the Bengali middle classes, separatist tendencies of the north-east people, spread of education in such remotest places, marriage of Indira Miri and many other historical episodes. Rashmi Buragohain exactly says: "It was an opportune moment for Indira Miri who was ready with great enthusiasm to move into the wilds of the then NEFA and bring the "people of the jungles" into mainstream India. As a woman she proved that she is no less than a man and made the people realize that in spite of being a woman; and that too, a widow, she is an individual who is capable of handling both family and work. Her

immense service to the people is something to reckon with for the changing perceptions of women today" (Buragohain: NEZINE). The character Sonadhar Senapati is delineated in the novel as an epitome of conflict and victimization.

The novelist seems to follow the technique of India's author Amitav Ghosh who juxtaposes untold historical episodes with diary writing habit. Anuradha makes use of this technique to unfold grievances of the tribal folk. She gathers and skillfully allows readers to have an idea about the grievances of the small communities through Mereng's diary writing habit which is an important aspect of the narrative. Mereng's daily notes are nothing but her startling experiences gathered in association with the local rulers.

The conflict that runs through the novel gets its sharp point when the novelist builds the narrative with mention of tendencies of single line administration of the then President Rajendra Prasad, Governor Jayaram and other bureaucrats. The novel narrates: "The Delhi officials and the present Governor are never frightened; they only see clouds of the sky. They feel reluctance to understand human predicament, wishes and ambitions, problems, tradition and heritage" (Anuradha, 405, 2010).

The novel deals with scrutiny on roles of its historical characters, dialogues, speeches in both positive and negative outlook. This technique can be treated as novelist's critical license. For instance, the novel brings forth some of the contradictions of Nehru's stand. Nehru announced that the tribals of the north-east should not be our second edition. But in practice it is seen that they are allowed to live in marginalized condition. Anuradha writes: "Nehru begins to see NEFA through Verrier Elwin's eyes and accepts his advices as more valuable than anything. Time is cruel; it would separate NEFA from us politically and mentally" (Anuradha, 2010, 411).

The novel has been a document of ethno-national conflict and rich in its aesthetic as well as literary deliberations for its smooth and artistic treatise on life cycle of Mereng, role of forest conservator Mohichandra Miri, Sonadhar Senapati, psychological humiliation of the bureaucrats, cross-

refences of historical environments class distinctions, anti-humanistic political designs of the central governance.

The language used in this fictional work claims lucidity and clarity; at times it emerges as historian's mood for a truthful accounts. An e-blog rightly maintains: "The author has great control over the language which is clear from the line of control she maintains throughout the novel. As readers we feel that *Mereng* writer has never tried to cash in on explicit description of otherwise potential situations where it was but natural to do so for a writer trying to grab market (2011).

If the future scholars of the literary discipline desire to through light on the novel as an autobiographical detail of Indira Miri, they should keep it in mind that it must beget the desired outcome. Only they shall have to rely on the teachings Anuradha tactfully puts through its analyses alongside historical scrutiny with her intuition and fictional plan. The novel is also memorable for it reflects indomitable spirit of a woman. The Telegraph rightly sums up "it can be called a successful depiction of the life, work and personality of Indira Miri that successfully portrayed her indomitable spirit and inner conflicts" (*The Telegraph*: 2011).

The great success, *Mereng* might claim, is its intrepid revelation on black chapters of Indian administration with J N Nehru. North-eastern region had been once a hotbed of politics of domination for Delhi rulers and *Mereng* uncovers this sorry state of affairs with highly imaginative apparatus.

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