

Some recurrent Issues in Contemporary Society in the Novels of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya and Indira Goswami

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Abstract

*The fiction from the Northeast India represents the issues of history, identity, migration, culture and tradition. This region is enriched with distinct culture, tradition, customs, rituals and beliefs. It is geographically, linguistically, ethnically and culturally different from the mainland India. Though the novelists write in English, they are unique. Novelists from this region delineate a beautiful geographical location, distinct culture and tradition that is rich in diversity. Political unrest, ethnic conflict, violence, insurgency, kidnapping and extortion form some of the recurrent themes in Northeast Indian English fiction. All these have created an interesting area of literary study, which is an emerging literary field. Literature from Northeast India represents identity crisis from the perspectives of regional history and gender biasness. It blends personal, family, regional and national issues in order to show the truth of history and identity in different sections of the society. Such issues are discussed in select novels and novelists of the said topic. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's *Love in the Time of Insurgency* (1960) and *Mrityunjay* (1970) explore representation of regional history in blending regional and national issues. In Indira Goswami's *The Man From Chinnamasta* (2005) and *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (1988), examine how women's identities are eroded and silenced because of patriarchy and gender discrimination in society.*

Key Words: History, Identity, National, Regional and Gender

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary literature reflects a society's political, social and personal views. The term 'contemporary literature' usually applies to anything written after the World War II. It reflects current trends in life and culture and questions facts. Contemporary literature often presents a contradictory argument side by side and reflects the author's perspective in the period of changing socio-cultural scenario. It covers with various genres in the form of poetry, fictions, non-fictions, drama and short stories in which it analysis from the perspectives of theory and criticism. Contemporary literature challenges the conventional representation of various issues in the contemporary society. Therefore, it evolves new mode of interpretation and analysis in the form of modernism, postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism.

Contemporary literature has a vast dimension and scope in the changing socio-cultural scenario. The issues are portrays through non-linear mode of narration in which challenges the conventional narrative

technique in their writings. It is not only alters the style of narrative technique, but it also changes the way of representation in the contemporary literature. Apart from these, writers like Salman Rushdie, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Luis Borges blend realism and fantasy as a magic realist to juxtapose the socio-political issues. Meta-fiction, meta-history and meta-narratives are clearly represents in the contemporary novelists.

Objective

The objective of this study is to explore identity and regional history in Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya and Indira Goswami's novels from contemporary perspectives. It will also throe light on subverted identity and marginalization of women in Assam.

II. Methodology

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data includes novels. Secondary data includes reference books, journals and internet sources. All the collected sources will be used to analyze the proposed objectives.

Hypothesis

With the advent of technologies and the deep impact of globalization, identity, history, culture and tradition are displaced in the multicultural society. It creates a difference and fragmentation against indigenous culture and tradition in the pluralistic society. After the end of war and the colonization, class struggle and separate identity shattered faith in the contemporary period.

III. Discussion

The fiction from the Northeast India represents the issues of history, identity, migration, culture and tradition. This region is enriched with distinct culture, tradition, customs, rituals and beliefs. It is geographically, linguistically, ethnically and culturally different from the mainland India. Though the novelists write in English, they are unique. Novelists from this region delineate a beautiful geographical location, distinct culture and tradition that is rich in diversity. Political unrest, ethnic conflict, violence, insurgency, kidnapping and extortion form some of the recurrent themes in Northeast Indian English fiction. All these have created an interesting area of literary study, which is an emerging literary field. Literature from Northeast India represents identity crisis from the perspectives of regional history and gender biasness. It blends personal, family, regional and national issues in order to show the truth of history and identity in different sections of the society. Such issues are discussed in select novels and novelists of the said topic. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's *Love in the Time of Insurgency* (1960) and *Mrityunjay* (1970) explore representation of regional history in blending regional and national issues. In Indira Goswami's *The Man From Chinnamasta* (2005) and *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (1988), examine how women's identities are eroded and silenced because of patriarchy and gender discrimination in society.

Identity is one of the relevant contexts in the contemporary period. It is a distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual or group. Identity means "the sameness of a person or thing at all times in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else" (Simson and Weiner

62). It is based on commonalities of ancestry, physical appearance, customs, culture or memories of a common historical experience. In contemporary period, while identity is shifting due to migration and globalization, and the dominance of patriarchal authority, there is a formation of subjectivity and selfhood to reform particular history along with different political strategies.

As identity is quest for similarities of one's various historical agendas such as cultures, customs and traditions, the characters and incidents of the select novels are contesting against difference and marginalization. Country's history in general and women's history in particular, reconstitute to achieve similarities and accuracy against the difference and hidden history of the past. The projections of colonial and dictatorial history hide the authenticity of regional history of particular region and national history of particular country. The factors behind these are the dominance of colonial ideologies in narrating their history. Such factors are well responded presenting the voice of the marginalized sections in society. In addition, their identity is justified through several historical forces such as castes, traditions, customs and cultures. Women's history is associated with an idea of gender biasness. Women remain oppressed under various social forces of patriarchal tyrannies. Historically, their identity is kept hidden through rigid conventions of religions, traditions and patriarchal violence. But women as artists try to deconstruct dominance through their work of art. This becomes the agenda of politics in country's history and women's history due to various opposite thoughts and practices. In the novels, the novelists show the marginalization of history and identity of Assam of Northeast India and Latin America. The novelists present not only about regional and national history of both the countries, but the discrimination and subjugations of women.

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya was the first Assamese to receive Jnanpith Award (1979) for his novel *Mriryunjay*(1970) and the recipient of SahityaAkademi Award (1961) for his novel *Love in the Time of Insurgency* (1960).The novels of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya are based on regionoriented history. While narrating the regional history, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya represents history, society, politics, religion, rituals, beliefs and practice of Northeast India. With the spread of new Indian patriotism during the Independence period, the writers flared up with regional sentiment. Like Walter Scott and Bankim Chandra, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya recreated the circumstances of the particular age in representing the historical facts with an authenticity.As a socialist, Bhattacharya gives a vivid picture of an imperial exploitation and economic depression during the particular period of a particular region. It throws light on the revolutionary strategies with nationalistic outlook.

In other writings of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, history is presented in regional context of social and political problems. It highlights the issues of the impact of war and the changing society of the region in the novels,*RajpatheRingiyai* (1955), *Sataghni*(1965) and*Pratipad* (1970).

In *RajpatheRingiyai* (1955), Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya projects the history of the idea of independence both for the country and the people of lower class. It criticizes the system of government during the attainment of freedom in 1947. It drew the attention to the problems like opium prohibition act, land revenue and other socio-economic problems. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's novel *Sataghni*(1965)is based on the attack of China upon India. It depicted a bad effect of war upon humanity. As a socialist, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya took the issue of real happenings of China attack upon India in 1962 in which he had shown the rigidity of the Assamese society of that time. The war has changed certain beliefs and customs of the people.

Pratipad (1970) is one of the significant novels of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya in which he portrays the labor strike of 1939 in Digboi during the last phase of Indian Independence. The Britishers and the owners of the Digboi Oil Refinery were exploited the immigrated labourers from different parts of India.

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya historicizes the past events in recreating the circumstances in *Love in the Time of Insurgency* (1960) and *Mrtyunjay* (1970). It represents socio-political awareness of Indian Independence Movement and Nagaland among the Assamese and the Nagas in Northeast India. With various historical issues, the novelist presents local sensibility in response to World War II, Naga Insurgency Movement, *Shanti Sena* and *Mrityu Bahini*. Besides regional affinity, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya juxtaposes the influences of Gandhi's Non-violence and Subhas Bose's INA. As a regional novelist, Bhattacharya depicts the life-style of a confined region, its peculiarities of language, customs, superstitions, thoughts, beliefs etc., the novelist linked historical turmoil of the past through his observations and experiences. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya explores whatever he has witnessed in the region. It appears with the motif of national sentiment, which arouses consciousness of the particular society.

In *Love in the Time of Insurgency* (1960), Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya examines the Naga uprising and its consequences in the light of world's political and socio-economic situation where it draws attention to the changing atmosphere of Naga society. The World War II and the domination of British and the Japanese over the Nagas brought disintegration against ethnic religion, tradition and custom of the people of Nagas. In history, the changes are also noticed in the name of war, Christianity and modern education, which it creates inter-rivalry among the Nagas. There are two oppositional groups, one is of non-violence group and one is the preacher of violence. Rishang's ideals are based on Gandhi's Non-violence, *Ahimsa* and on the otherhand, Videssellie adopted the violence of INA, Subhas Bose. Videssellie's idea of independence was unclear when he countered Rishang in his camp. Rishang replied by indicating his disapproval of Videssellie's idea:

“The Nagas are a distinct group no doubt, but they belong to a great family, I mean the Indian nation” (Bhattacharya Birendra Kumar, 273).

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya narrates all these historical episodes in relation to particular region of the country. The revolutionary spirits of Videssellie is the Insurgency Movement of the Nagas during the time of Zapho Phizo. Videssellie's Insurgency Movement was to free the Nagas from various external forces and was to create Nagaland as a separate nation. The negligence of government is understood in the operation of No-Tax Campaign of 1948 in among the Nagas. The novelist has significantly examined the social unrest in the history of Northeast India. It explores the existing history in order to recover the neglected entity of particular indigenous community. Rishang and Videssellie's quest for separate nation are based on identifying the differences and lapse of the Nagas. Government institutions and new cultural practices overlook their history. So, Rishang and Videssellie's motive is to represent the repressed desires of the people of Nagaland. From this perspective, it looks at history in a larger social context with various ideologies and cultural icon of Gandhi's Non-violence and Subhas Bose's INA.

In his novel *Mrtyunjay* (1970), Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya throws light on the historical facts of different regions in Assam. Violent mass upsurge is subject matter of the novel that analyzes all political and social turmoil during the Independence Movement. The historical incidents of Gahpur, Dekhiajuli and

Barhampur are actual historical events. The martyrdom of KushalKonwar, Kanaklata, TilakDeka, Kamala Miri and BhogeswariPhukanani are true historical incidents that is reflected through fictional characters of Koli, Dhanpur, Goossain and others in the novel. It focuses on Quit India Movement of 1942, role of *Shanti Sena*, *MrityuBahini*, and Underground Resistance Movement. The conflicting ideologies are found in Gossain, Dhanpur and his members to derail the train. These are due to the two different strategies of Gandhi's *Satyagraha* and Subhas Bose's Guerilla tactics. In the novel, the novelist presented the complexities of transitional period at the time of Independence Movement in Assam.

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's *Love inthe Time of Insurgency* and *Mrityunjay*critically explore various institutions like culture, government and other institutions in response to the history. These institutions create gap and inequal representation of history and identity in the region. The novels could be read as a type of message that highlights the positive and negative impact of people's strategies in their freedom movement.

In Northeast India, particularly in Assam, womenare oppressed and marginalized by both: patriarchal hegemony and religious institutions. They are deeply affected by the violence, insurgency and agitation. Under such socio-political turmoil, there is a transition of women through education, social activists and political rights. Women writers of Assam through their writings represent the issue of patriarchy and male violence. Their works have created a niche in the field of literature.As a novelist, Indira Goswami received many awards for her literary works.

The issues of marriage, widowhood, caste and religion, and insurgency are the institutions that have played an important role in victimization of women. In her novels *The Course of the Chenab*(1972), *Blue-Necked God*(1976),*The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (1988) and*The Man FromChinnamasta*(2005), Indira Goswami examines the plight of women. All these novels reveal the atrocities meted to women. Women are marginalized due to orthodox religious institutions and its practices. The widows and the girl child are deprived from their rights. They are exploited because of patriarchal and religious norms. All these women related issues are also depictin some of her famous short stories, *The Empty Chest* and *The Offspring*. In *The Journey* and,*Dwarka and His Gun*, Indira Goswami poignantly depicts insurgency and violence in Assam. It also presents the horrible political situation in Assam.

Most of Indira Goswami's works are based on her life experiences as a woman. In her novels and short stories, Indira Goswami interweaves patriarchy with deep psychological problems of the weaker sections of the society. She draws the plight of Hindu widows in the conservative Hindu society. *The Course of the Chenab* reflects the symbol of women's desire and fulfillment. Women are imposed with religious and social customs and fear of assault. Indira Goswami gives a graphic account of the exploitation of Hindu widows in Vrindavan. It is significantly represented in her novel *The Blue-Necked God*(1976). She describes the corrupt practices of the priest who sexually exploited*Radhashyamis*, destitute widows of Vrindavan. Mrinalini, Sashiprabha and Saudamini lived under the threat of death. Some younger women are forced into prostitiotion with priest.Indira Goswami's*An Unfinished Authobiography*delineates her own life experiences as daughter, student, academician, married wife and widow. Indira Goswami suffers from loneliness and separation during her life. As a widow, she realizes the problems of widowhood. *The Offspring*, a short story of Indira Goswami criticizes the conventions of patriarchal society through the character of Damayanti. It destabilizes marginalization of widows in the society. Indira Goswami'swriting demonstrates the idea of women from the

perspective of traditional and modern women. She blends caste, social customs and rituals. Both passive and active characters appeared in her writings.

Indira Goswami's *The Man From Chinnamasta* (2005) explores old rituals of animal sacrifice in Kamrup district of Assam. Besides revolving around the animal sacrifice by the priests, the novelist focuses on the age-old rituals affect women in the region. The practice of traditional rituals dehumanizes not only the animals, but also all the categories of women. Dorothy was neglected because she was barren. She was raped by her husband's men during her stay near Jatadhari's camp. Since the idea of wife is based on the tradition of social construction and patriarchy, women are marginalized as second sex. "In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone De Beauvoir states that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (330). Dorothy is a victim of social forces, her value as a woman is degraded to an object of male gaze. Bidhibala was not willing to marry according to the choice of her father, Sinhadatta. But, Sinhadatta wanted Bidhibala to marry with high caste man because marriage is a custom and tradition in the society. Marriage brings out the purity of women in the Brahmin society. In this situation, Bidhibala is deprived as female where she is unable to raise against her father. She is also marginalized as Other because she is an inferior being in comparison to male.

Politics shape the related status of male and female. Dorothy was betrayed by her husband, Henry Brown and therefore she got associated with the disciples of Jatadhari. Dorothy and Bidhibala are suppressed as they do not have the type of personality in their temperament. They are subjugated in terms of aggression and force because these women are ignorant and weak as female. In the process of socialization, Sinhadatta wants his daughter, Bidhibala to maintain domestic attendants which is not different from the savagery of an animal. Bidhibala and Dorothy destabilize the politics in the assigned role of male as a superior and female as an inferior.

Set in the *Sattra* of Amranga, situated in South Kamrup, Assam, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (1988) brings out the personal experiences of Indira Goswami in religious institution during post-independence years. Indira Goswami highlights revolution and oppression of women against the code of conduct in the Hindu society. Women suffer not only due to the religious restrictions because of patriarchal tyranny. Indranath represents the patriarchal, the spiritual head of the *Sattra*. But, he falls a victim to the patriarchal violence as the communist agitated to change the traditional norms of life for the purpose of bringing about equal status in the social classifications. The widows, older Gossainee, Durga, Saru Gossainee and Giribala are forced to perform strict role both as married women, wives and daughters. The older Gossainee lead a miserable life. Married to a rich philanderer made her more miserable as a widow. Durga shared the same fate as a widow. After the death of her husband, she is treated as a poor thing in her parents' house. Being a non-entity, she abstains herself from meat and many other things. Her in-law's house seized her property because she is a widow. She goes back to her in-laws house to die with dignity. Saru Gossainee, another widow is also a victim of rigid social conventions. She was betrayed by the peasants and Mahidar. She hesitates to fight for justice because of social censure. Giribala's case is similar to the other widows of *Sattra*, who is made sacrifice to anything due to social injustice. She refused to live her in-laws house. To overcome this pathetic situation, Indranath engaged her to help Mark in his research work. But, the touch of Mark violates the code of Brahmin widow where it is said that a widow should not touch the outcaste and other women. All these incidents in the novel reflect their identities in the form of sub-human against the shadow of rituals and customs of Brahmin community.

Indira Goswami's works document the plight of women. And the writer tries to present their social, political and economic predicament in a vivid and powerful manner. Marriage, rituals, religion and culture are the factors that subjugate women in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. With no other alternative options, the widows in the novel remain subjugated. Older Gossainee, Saru Gossainee, Durga, Giribala and Eliman are subjected to oppression. These women borne the brunt of patriarchal violence. Even after marriage, they undergo all sorts of treatment at their in-laws house. As widows, they are overlooked because they lose authority when they lose their husband. The otherness is always acknowledged in them by the policy makers and binds them to an object of superiority of male. Giribala questions the tortures against women and the prejudices of the society. Though she is betrayed by her husband, she does not lose hope and therefore keeps fighting for justice. Durga and Saru Gossainee accept the religious laws that have governed them. But, Giribala fights against such atrocities.

Indira Goswami's novels *The Man From Chinnamasta* and *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* highlight the exclusion of Hindu Brahmin women in Northeast India. In the region, women are marginalized for various reasons viz. religion, culture, tradition and other customary practices. She examines different institutions that has oppressed the identities of women mostly in Sattrā, a vaishnavite monastery in particular and religious institution in general. Indira Goswami criticizes orthodox Brahmin Hindu society through such characters: Durga, Saru Gossainee and Giribala.

IV. Conclusion

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya and Indira Goswami represent the regional history and women's identity from Northeast India. Bhattacharya's works touch upon myriad aspects of life: culture, tradition, religion, politics and violence in his writings. Apart from these issues, war, freedom movement and nationalist sentiment are addressed in his writings. In the novel *Love in the Time of Insurgency* (1960), Bhattacharya examines the Naga freedom movement and the insurgency during the time of World War-II. Ethnic conflict and violence are significantly presented to examine indigenous tradition and identity. The novel juxtaposes the historical issues of internal and external conflict of Nagaland during the time of World War-II. It is a message to reread history from new historical perspectives. There are also conflicting ideologies of Gandhi's non-violence and Subhas Bose's violence. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's *Mrityunjay* (1970) explores the history of the Indian freedom movement after the Quit India Movement of 1942. Besides, the novel explores the issue of train derailment during the British Raj. Ethnic violence, insurgency and class struggle are the dominant issues in Bhattacharya's novels. Such incidents and episodes inspired the imagination of the writer and Bhattacharya is able to pen them down in some of the noted work of art. Indira Goswami deconstructs patriarchal and religious violence through gynocritic approaches. Her works appear to be a protest to change orthodox tradition and culture of women in Assam of Northeast India. *The Man From Chinnamasta* (2005) condemns the problems of marriage. Set in the South Kamrup of Assam, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (1988) explores the plight of widows where they are restricted from equal rights and space in a conservative society. Goswami criticizes such social flaws that affected women in the contemporary period.

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