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Portrayal Of The Woman In The Short Stories Of Lakshminath Bezbaroa

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Abstract:

Portrayal of a society in limited scope is no easy task. It takes a lot of effort and dedication to make this task a success. Lakshminath Bezbaroa took such a responsibility during the last decade of the nineteenth century which continued to flourish during the first part of the twentieth century. His all-round contribution to Assamese literature is commendable. But the beginning was challenging for him. Burmese invasion of Assam in the first few decades of the nineteenth century had devastated the Assamese life and society. There was hopelessness all around. Then came the Yandaboo Treaty of 1826 where the Assamese people lost their liberty and Assam came under colonial rule of the British. The British rulers in Assam, for their administrative convenience, imposed the Bengali language upon the Assamese people. The Bengali language became the official language of Assam. This language policy started from 1836 and it continued till 1873. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was the foremost crusader in this ideological war of reinstatement of the Assamese language back in her former place. British administrator A. J. Moffat Mills in his Report on the Province of Assam (1854), echoed Anondoram Dhekial Phukan's voice for the reestablishment of the Assamese language. Finally, in 1873 the Assamese language was reinstated in Assam. The Arunodoi, established by the American Baptist Missionaries tried to fill up the vacuum created in regard to the Assamese language for about a century since the British took over Assam. But it was not sufficient.

The new journey began in 1889 when enthusiastic Assamese youths like Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Chandrakumar Agarwala, Hem Chandra Goswami and others initiated the "Jonaki" in Calcutta. It was through Jonaki that Lakshminath Bezbaruah embarked on that long journey related to the revival of Assamese literature and language. His short stories are an example of his diverse creative ability. His profound contribution to Assamese short story has earned him the title "Father of Modern Assamese short story. This Paper is an attempt to study how he has portrayed the woman in his short stories.

KEY WORDS: Limited scope, flourish, commendable, hopelessness, colonial rule, reinstatement.

Introduction:

Lakshminath Bezbaroa is the undaunting stalwart of modern Assamese literature who heralded the beginning of a new era in Assamese literature through the publishing of "Jonaki" – the mouthpiece of the Axamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha in 1889. The literary journal "Jonaki" carried forward the aspirations of the Assamese people way back in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Burmese invasion of Assam in the first few decades of the nineteenth century had devastated the Assamese life and society. There was hopelessness all around. Then came the Yandaboo Treaty of 1826 where the Assamese people lost their liberty and the Assamese

came under colonial rule of the British. The British rulers in Assam, for their administrative convenience, imposed the Bengali language upon the Assamese people. The Bengali language became the official language then. This language policy started from 1836 and it continued till 1873. Anondoram Dhekial Phukan was the foremost crusader in this ideological war of reestablishing the Assamese language. In his Report on the Province of Assam which was published in 1854 British officer Andrew John Moffat Mills too, echoed Anondoram Dhekial Phukan's voice in favour of the reinstatement of the Assamese language. Officiating Commissioner Colonel John Henry Hutton, who was the former Administrator of the Naga Hills and went on to become an Anthropologist at Cambridge, he was also in favour of the reinstatement of the Assamese language in Assam. This long-term ideological battle came to be realized in 1873 when the Assamese language was reinstated in Assam. Arunodoi – the first Assamese journal and newspaper got started in 1846. The Arunodoi acted as the gateway to usher in a new era in the revival of the Assamese language and literature. Historical documents say that the last issue of Arunodoi was published in December, 1880.

A positive vibe is always associated with the word exploration. By the end of the eventful 19th Century, the Assamese society had varied experience. The enthusiastic Assamese youth front who went to Calcutta during that period of time, have had diverse experience. Impact of Western education brought enlightenment of the conventional Bengali society of those times. Whether be it modern education, social reforms or reforms in other spheres of life, the Bengalis made good progress. Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Chandrakumar Agarwalla, Hemchandra Goswami were among those enthusiastic young men from Assam who had gone to Calcutta then for higher studies. Along with a few more Assamese students who had gone to Calcutta for higher studies such as Kanaklal Barua, Benudhar Rajkhowa, Padmanath Gohainbauah, Anandachandra Agarwala, Satyanath Bora, Lambodor Bora, Sonaram Choudhury, Radhakanta Handiqui, etc. established a society named "Axamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha" at Mirzapur street on 25th August, 1888. This was followed by the publishing of the mouthpiece of this society in the year 1889. The mouthpiece was "Jonaki"(moonbeam). With the passage of time the Jonaki became the pioneer literary journal in regard to the development and spread of Assamese literature with a modern outlook. At this juncture Lakshminath Bezbaroa was that guiding force who gave shape to the modern Assamese short story. In the annals of the history of Assamese literature he is remember as the Father of modern Assamese short story. This Paper aims at highlighting some of the woman characters in the short stories of Lakshminath Bezbaroa and analyze the social critic Bezbaroa.

Objectives:

Portrayal of some distinct woman characters of the short stories of Lakshminath Bezbaroa.

Give a critical view of the Assamese society on the crossroads of change.

Methodology:

This Paper is based on available documents, primary and secondary source data. Henceforth, the descriptive and analytical approach has been adopted.

Results & Discussion : Woman in the short stories of Lakshminath Bezbaroa:

A minute critic of society, Lakshminath Bezbaroa has showcased many social issues in his short stories. The apathy of the conventional society towards woman has been the theme of many a short story of Lakshminath Bezbaroa. One of the short stories included in his compilation "Surabhi" is "Nistarini Devi aka Fatema Bibi". In the story the character herself tells her tale of woe to the writer. The woman was born as Nistarini Devi to a haughty rich Brahmin of Bardwan district of Bengal. When she was a little girl of seven, she tasted sweetened vermicelli in a Muslim household. Her father, though weathy and haughty, had enemies in the village. They spread the news of his little daughter of having food in a Muslim household which calls for the family being boycotted by society. Her father was not to give in easily. He disowned his innocent daughter of seven years. Then Nistarini Devi found shelter in the same Muslim household. She was converted and given the new name Fatema Bibi. She was married off to a Muslim youth. She became a mother too. But cholera snatched away her husband and children. She was left a pauper. Moreover she was with child. She slipped and fell down while loading bricks at a house construction site. The owner of the house was also the narrator of the story. Out of humanity he helped her to revive and sent her away after hearing to her tale of woe.

In this short story the religious intolerance comes to the forefront. In addition to this the treacherous attitude of man towards other men can be observed through the character of Nistarini Devi's father and the other people of the village who put Nistarini Devi into great trouble only for taking revenge upon her father. Allowing a pregnant woman to work in danger prone zone is not acceptable. This calls for punishment by law. Unfortunately, no such law was in force then. The writer, as the first narrator, could do nothing, except offer his sympathy to the poor woman.

In the same compilation, we find the short story "The Skull" (Laukhula). The plight of a woman that has been projected in this story is quite pathetic. In a male dominated society, a woman has no voice of her own. She has always to abide by the will of a man whether be it her father, husband, brother or son. In conjugal life she is nothing but a commodity of the man she is married to. There is another bleak picture of the man-woman relationship. The all-powerful man in society may use the woman to fulfil his carnal desire at times. He may not give the woman the status of a wife. In such immoral relationship it is the woman who suffers. In this story Nalini's brother-in-law of lewd character exploited her physically and when she became pregnant the heartless man murdered her. Nalini's brother-in-law was an influential man in society. So, he didn't want anybody to tarnish his respectable image in society. As a result, the poor young Nalini was murdered. The writer has created a super natural atmosphere to voice the grievance and protest against the hypocrisy of society and the custodians of social norms. It is worthwhile to note that the short story compilation "Surabhi" was published in the year 1909. Going through this information of the publication and the issue raised in "The Skull", it can be understood that some women faced inferno like situation during that time in society. The backdrop of the short story may be the society of Bengal, but the issue related to Nalini is universal. Such issues are alive even in today's world. The grievance expressed in the story is quite relevant.

Inheritance, bloodline, etc.; are significant terms as far as the conventional society is concerned. A male heir's name is always associated with these terms. If the first born is not a male child but a female, then senior members of the family show apathy towards the daughter. This is what that has been projected in the story "Madhoimaloti". Furthermore such parents with conventional mindset believes that giving a daughter into marriage to someone indicates the end of liability of the parents. Some of such marriages flourish, but some marriages get delayed. In this story the father of three daughters, Madhob Toroni, could not get a perfect groom for his eldest daughter Madhoimaloti. He wanted to marry off his daughter to a scion of some prestigious family of high position in society. But he was unable to get such a match for his daughter. The daughter loved someone whom her father would not approve of due to his weak financial status. Madhoimaloti made up her mind and eloped with the boy of her choice to live happily ever after.

The central character of the short story has protested against the hypocrisy of society. Furthermore she has hit at her father's pride concerning the social status issue.

"Bhodori" is one of the most read short story of Lakshminath Bezbaroa. It has been compiled in his second short story collection "Xadhu Kothar Kuki" published in the year 1910. The story of "Bhodori" is based on an incident of mundane life. Bhodori's husband Shisuram beat her black and blue for a slight negligence. During that time her husband hit her with a large knife. She was bleeding. On that fateful hour her brother-in-law Kinaram came to her rescue and her life was saved. Her husband Shisuram was sent to jail and she was admitted into hospital. When she regained her senses, she saw her handcuffed husband in front of her hospital bed. She tried to save her husband by saying that it was an accident which caused her so much pain. Her husband realized his fault. But it was too late then. The damage was already done.

Bhodori is but the embodiment of the ideal Indian woman with all her virtues. She was a devoted wife, a sincere woman and above all a good human being. Her response to the accident was simple. At the same time, she has a humane heart. Here lies the essence of the short story "Bhodori".

Another prominent short story written by Lakshminath Bezbaroa titled "Paatmoogi" needs special attention as it has been written keeping the female psychology in mind. Paatmoogi belonged to an artisan family. She was a beautiful young maiden. A Brahmin youth fell in love with her, married her and came to stay at her house. After a few months her Brahmin husband left her for good. It came to Paatmoogi's knowledge that her husband had gone back to his own people and started conjugal life anew with a Brahmin girl. Paatmoogi realized that it was futile to search for her husband as he had already made up his mind to forsake her. Weakness of the female mind, her thought process, the treatment meted out to her by the society and men- all these aspects have been found in this short story. Paatmoogi could understand the sinister attitude of men. She withdrew her complaint in court and decided to turn back home. Here, the narrator is a distantly related uncle of Paatmoogi.

Sympathy and empathy go hand in hand in human relationships. Whether be it individual to individual relationship or individual -society relationship, the above-mentioned virtues are always there. Lakshminath Bezbaroa was also a crusader against social ills. In his numerous short stories, he has incorporated this aspect where the under privileged group has been projected. Keeping in view the social setup of Bezbaroa's time the women characters also, fall into this under privileged group. Here, the word "Under privileged" has not been used keeping the economic aspect in mind. It covers a broader range of aspects. This includes social security of the women, safeguard of their self -dignity and respect, providing economic opportunities which may lead to financial independence- the foremost asset of self -empowerment, etc.

In the above discussion we have come across the female protagonist of the short story "Paatmoogi." Here, Paatmoogi belongs to the artisan community. The short story writer has specifically mentioned that the source of Paatmoogi's family income was making clay pottery. To some extent Paatmoogi can be considered economically empowered. But the writer has projected a bleak picture also where the narrator of the story explained how colonial rule of the British and their economic policies hampered the economic wellbeing of the potters. In that case Paatmoogi has lost that economic opportunity. She was forced to live in poverty. The female protagonist in "Madhoimaloti" is Madhoimaloti herself. Due to the snobbery and hypocritical attitude of her father, Madhoimaloti's love life was on the verge of collapsing. Her wealthy father wouldn't allow her to marry the man of her choice as he belonged to a financially weak background. But Madhoimaloti was not a woman to bow down easily to the hypocritical attitude of her father. She eloped with her lover and became mistress of her own fate. Before her elopement with her lover, she left a letter addressed to her father which read-

"Father,

Your plan has failed. You cannot harass an innocent young man coming from a respectable family. I have come out with the one I have chosen as my life partner. He is none other than Sanatan whom you despise for his weak economic background. Nobody can change my decision. If you ever, can forgive me, then you may be able to see me, otherwise treat this as my last goodbye call to you.

Your daughter

Madhoimaloti

Who has offended you"

(Gogoi, p. 60, Translated by the Paper writer)

Going through the wordings of the letter of the protagonist Madhoimaloti, it can be assumed that she was critical of her father's outlook. Her father was a selfish man too. He was insensitive as well. So, she mustered courage and decided to make her stand clear about the future of her life and take decision on her own. She can be counted among those few women characters of Lakshminath Bezbaroa who could make her stand clear and maintain her self- dignity and freedom of choice in a male dominated conservative society. This voice of protest of Madhoimaloti is a modern trait.

Conclusion:

Like a true crusader Lakshminath Bezbaroa took upon himself the task of reviving Assamese literature from its stagnant stage. He left no stone unturned in this novel endeavour. The story stories written by Lakshminath Bezbaroa indicate to this zeal and motivating attitude of the litterateur. If seen from a broader perspective, the entire Assamese society with her virtues and shortcomings fall into the ambit of his study. The few examples cited and discussed in this Paper give us the scope to realize that Bezbaroa was empathic towards the issues of woman faced in society. He was not a social activist. It was through his writings where he tried to give an awakening call to the people in society to free the Assamese society of some irrational conventions and beliefs. The woman characters discussed in this Paper have has to go through trials and tribulations in life due to the callous attitude of a conventional society which was always at conflict with liberal ideas and practices. Class hypocrisy and exploitation of the weak in diverse forms dis-stabilized the Assamese society of those times. Through his short stories, the writer Lakshminath Bezbaroa has tried to enlighten the masses on such negative traits which are a curse to society.

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