



Women's Agency and Resistance in Colonial Assam: Re-reading Nirupama Borgohain's Abhiyatri

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Re-presentation provides the power to a subject to “break stereotypes and construct a self-identity that understands geopolitical and postcolonial realities” (Burney62). It attempts to fill the gaps that representation maintains between seeing and being. ‘Representation’ “sustains a needed distance between experience and formulation. It recognizes the fictive in our understanding” (Beer77). That ‘fictive’ poses the question of representing women – who has the power to speak on behalf of those women who has remained hidden in the pages of history? Women can become the obvious choice of representing their counterparts, but do they experience similar contexts to authenticate? Thus, the need here arises to re-present and make the past our present.

History has always been interpreted to suit the minds of the people. But recent trends in the study of history are responsible for re-presentation of histories that also brought to the fore the formerly occluded pages of the past. These occluded pages contained the stories of women who have been since then constantly under the scanner. 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 discovery 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.

Assam too is not devoid of the women who were able to assert their individual self, but they are still under-represented and need to be unearthed. It is the relentless work of women like Tilottama Misra, Aparna Mahanta, Sheela Bora and Shiela Borthakur, and the laudable efforts of the Asom Lekhika Samaroh Samiti and Lekhika Santha that we are today aware of the women in colonial Assam who need to be placed in history with utmost respect for their remarkable contribution towards the Assamese society. Fiction being a popular medium to reach out to the masses, it is indeed a feat to be accomplished by many of our postcolonial novelists in re-presenting the women in colonial Assam. Nirupama Borgohain has made a significant exploration of the colonial Assamese woman in Abhiyatri (1993) as transmitter of culture and bearer of change thus offering an alternative perspective that challenges the traditional views of women's role and agency.

Based on the tumultuous life of Chandraprova Saikiani, Abhiyatri provides impetus to a woman to be very vocal and self-reliant. Chandraprova is the fiery other whose voice gave her the power to establish her own

identity in society. The otherwise silent image of the colonial woman was shattered to usher in the new woman who has a voice of her own. She treads the path that was shunned by the contemporary women and etched out her identity never to be erased by being written over or unwritten by the dominant narrative of official history. The experiences that she went through brought about a new meaning to her individual self and we can see the emergence of women's self-assertion coming in:

Some of the most significant advances in women's thought were given us by such women, whose personal struggle for an alternative mode of living infused their thinking. But such women, for most of historical time, have been forced to live on the margins of society; they were considered "deviant" and as such found it difficult to generalize from their experience to others and to win influence and approval (Lerner225).

In 're-doing' the life of Chandraprova, Borgohain confronts her as the text to understand the context. In colonial Assam the prevalent customs of child marriage and purdah system were the major deterrents to women's emancipation. The advent of the British in 1826 saw the streaks of change with new ideas gradually creeping into Assam that paved the women to gain visibility in the public sphere. The men in the society dreaded that women's yearning for independence will accommodate more daunting time for them. They held the view, as can be traced in the pages of journals like Assam Bandhu (1885-1886), that women's freedom would always lead to 'lawlessness' and the 'flouting of custom' (Mahanta23).

The import of new ideas from the West saw the birth of an ideology that accepted, as Partha Chatterjee has noted in "The Nationalist Resolution of Women's Question", the pursuance of science, technology, rational economics, and western political forms while regarding the home as the source of "true identity" that needed protection and strengthening, not transformation (Forbes 15). The home, represented by the woman, stands out as a symbol of the nation that needs to be preserved and protected. Any attempt to encroach the sanctity of home was opposed and that led to a two-fold nationalism as pointed out by Partha Chatterjee in his article "Whose Imagined Community?":

By my reading, anti-colonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains - the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the 'outside', of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an 'inner' domain bearing the 'essential' marks of cultural identity. The greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture (217).

This 'political battle' for 'two-fold nationalism' kept the women outside the hegemonic power structures to become the mute subject. Her place was restricted to the four walls of the house and she always had to remain behind the veils whenever she emerges out of the house. This "andarmahal" called by Partha Chatterjee as that edge of uncolonised space which the Indian men prevented to be encroached by the colonizer. Surprisingly, these very Indian men themselves followed the Western value system in public life. The purdah system in Assam was prevalent only among the upper castes. People belonging to the lower strata of the society had the freedom to move about freely. In order to situate the Assamese women in the backdrop of all such social ills against women the task remains with the postcolonial writer to rehistoricise the texts and re-present the colonial woman in the context of today.

In Recasting Women Sangari and Vaid have argued that women in colonial period internalized "the offered models" of private/public sphere ideologies, with "varying degrees of conformity" (21). The suggestion here is that the Indian women were not only offered 'models', but also, they themselves had the tendency to submit or conform to them. This was the sheer destructive power of the all-powerful colonial-patriarchal

force that could silence the vulnerable subject. Yet, when we examine Chandraprova's contributions to making of the modern state such a picture turns out to be misleading. She not only actively participated, but also legitimized her presence in the public sphere thus blurring the divide between the private and the public. *Abhiyatri* is an exploration of the agency and resistance of colonial women in Assam as re-presented by the postcolonial Assamese writer Nirupama Borgohain. She has explored very succinctly the life of a colonial woman in Assam which otherwise would have remained hidden under the recorded histories. While retrieving an Assamese woman's past, Borgohain has explored the consciousness of a woman through the character of Chandraprova who has emerged as an individual having her own identity.

While dwelling on intelligence we cannot ignore Chandraprova in *Abhiyatri* who is quick enough to recognize the social evils during that period. Her journey to selfhood begins from her childhood when she was old enough to understand the discrimination against women in the society. Her desire to get herself educated is proved by her sheer grit in continuing her schooling in spite of the arduous journey that she had to undertake by crossing the waist-deep muddy waters. She is able to make her voice heard when she had to stand for the rights of the mute natives. This comes to the fore when she, as a student, verbally opposes the living condition of the native boarders in the hostel of the Nagaon Mission School: "We have come to know that a girl who has come to our hostel has been asked to stay in the warehouse. The reason that she has been ordered to stay along with other things in the warehouse is that she has refused to accept your religion. If you do not withdraw such a punishment meted out to one of our girls then we won't do further Bible classes" (62). This daring, fiery character of the young Chandraprova tells of the woman who needs to speak and stand for herself.

A rebel woman who questions the very essence of being a woman has been immortalized by Nirupama Borgohain in the image of Chandraprova Saikiani in the novel *Abhiyatri*. Chandraprova's tumultuous life made her a stronger woman who not only stood up to the circumstances, but made the Assamese woman question her own identity in society and embark on a path to self-realization. She vehemently opposed the purdah system in the colonial society and is responsible for consolidating the women throughout Assam which Sandhya Devi, in her article "Adhunik Yugat Axomiya Nari", compares with that of the protest made by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott against the custom of the veil in the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention held at London:

The Abolitionist women suffered a great blow at the world Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840 when women delegates were denied participation and were forced to sit behind a curtain in the balcony. As a result of this shocking experience Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, activists in the Abolition struggle, resolved to agitate for women's right upon return to the U.S. (38).

It makes a significant study to probe into the acceptance of a rebellious woman in the society who trespassed all the societal norms to instigate the women to realize their self-consciousness. It is also interesting to note as well as question the excitement in Chandraprova upon being conferred the Padmashri. Her happiness on being conferred the Padmashri may be questioned on the ground that was it for this individual recognition that Chandraprova struggled? Her happiness is not for her individual recognition, but recognition for all women, a victory for women's individuality.

Society does everything to keep the women silent, and they "coming to voice" agency paved the way for social and political change in society. In *Abhiyatri*, Borgohain identifies Chandraprova as a colonial subject who could voice her demands of the right to speak as well as to be heard. When she was left alone by the man in her life to become a single mother it was her sheer determination and grit that enabled her to face the world. She was not only successful in beginning a new chapter in her life, but was also able to earn the respect that she almost lost. The society's opportunity to silence the "mute" woman was thwarted by Chandraprova's awareness of her 'self'. The postcolonial writer needs to re-write history and unfold the untold stories of the women in colonial times.

Chandraprova not only expressed her demands, but also organized women in Assam. In spite of that she was side-lined once the nationalist project was over to establish what Partha Chatterjee claimed: “the relative unimportance of the women’s question in the last decades of the nineteenth century is not to be explained by the fact that it had been censored out of the reform agenda or overtaken by the more pressing and emotive issues of political struggle. It was because nationalism had in fact resolved ‘the women’s question’ in complete accordance with its preferred goals” (237). In this regard, Borgohain has skillfully narrated history from the experience of Chandraprova herself to enable the readers to perceive her ability to bring out the consciousness within her:

The story of women’s role in the nationalist struggle is not simply one of marionettes who were told when to march and where to picket. First, the numbers of women who played some role in this movement, however small, far exceeded expectations. The nature of their work influenced how women saw themselves and how others saw their potential contribution to national development. At the same time their involvement helped to shape women’s view of themselves and of their mission (Forbes 122).

We see her emerging as a person who is aware of her capacity for self-reliance and who has the deliberate choice for independence and freedom.

The attempts to keep Chandraprova suppressed goes awry and we see her emerging a winner wherever she goes. She inspires the women to pull down the purdah that segregates them and consolidates the women throughout Assam. This was the time when streaks of modernity were gradually creeping into Assamese society. There were a few who advocated women’s education and Chandraprova was in the opportune moment to be able to go for studies. But most of the people prohibited the women to step out of the premises of their houses. It makes a striking picture of Chandraprova cycling to school during such conditions. She became the talk of the town, but her sheer determination and sincerity for her work enabled her to attain respect for herself. When she was conferred the Padmashri award she was elated and looked forward to receive it in person. This is the ultimate acceptance of a woman who dared to give a voice to the women and establish herself as an individual.

In spite of being abandoned by the man in her life Chandraprova never gave up the spirit of *joie de vivre*. She continued her service for the upliftment of women and never tolerated any kind of injustice against women. A fiery woman, who was so harsh and vocal at times, had embodied within her a “softness” which was felt by her co-workers (Borgohain 341). Her son Atul is also at times mystified by the dichotomies of her personality. He wonders about her being so conscious of her ‘self’ and so proud and rebellious, she is also at the same time so delicate (361). We see him, in the words of Partha Chatterjee, as one who is “struggling to cope with the change” (309). She is the same person who not only struggled throughout her life for the rights of the women, but also spent her life as a devoted wife in spite of being thwarted by her beloved (362). The consciousness of a woman is embedded deep within her and she asserts her individuality with her strong personality to know herself objectively. Such are the contexts that reveal the inevitable encounter of tradition with modernity.

Chandraprova’s ability to ‘voice’ her individuality made her a deviant and as Tilottama Misra recalled in a personal interview that women at that time were strictly asked to avoid Chandraprova because she was ‘fallen’. It is the sheer artistic skill of Nirupama Borgohain to bring alive the distinctive facet of the colonial woman in Chandraprova who had a mind of her own. But Aparna Mahanta notes that Borgohain is unable to achieve in the novel, the “seamless interweaving of the ‘personal’ with the ‘political’” to unearth the ‘real’ Chandraprova who is

the passionate, thinking, feeling woman, hidden behind the popular stereotypes of a freedom fighter and leading light of the Mahila Samiti. She believed in living life to the full, whether writing, working for society, loving with passion and commitment or, as a single mother, bringing up her son to be a worthy son of Assam, striving always to go beyond gender and

social stereotypes to become in the real sense a 'complete woman', a true human being (Mahanta, The Assam Tribune6).

Mahanta claims that the life history of Chandraprova Saikiani is the history of the Assam Mahila Samity, the history of women's role in the freedom struggle in Assam (26). The kind of rebuke and pain that Chandraprova had to endure made her much stronger and resolute to work for women's development and the country's freedom from colonial rule. Her belief in the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi enabled her to play a significant and laudable role in leading Assam in India's struggle for freedom. She always voiced her protest against the extremist activities during the freedom struggle (Kalita103). It is pertinent to quote Aparna Mahanta here:

It is well known that Chandraprova Saikiani was a fighter against discrimination and social injustice all her life, both in personal matters and in the public arena. Less attention is paid to the fact that she was also a great achiever, indeed a role model for women not only for her own generation but also of the present, a pioneer of modernity and change in a society weighed down by the burden of tradition and obscurantism (6)

Chandraprova is an aberration who had that consciousness of a woman within her and would never let others to transgress her space, which was exclusively her own. Re-reading unveils the colonial woman who has a voice as Chandraprova, in the true sense of the term. Abhiyatri is a platform that enables us to re-read the silent female subject, and acknowledges the re-presentation of her sufferings as well as her resistance to suppression, thus engendering individual and political agency.

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