

Wither Kuntala, Bandita, Anurupa? Wo(e)manhood and the World of Bhabendra Nath Saikia's Short Stories

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"Silence reveals speech-unless it is speech that reveals the silence". (Macherey 254).

Silences are profound and there are certain areas beneath the silences and the shadows that are seldom addressed or expressed. The issue of sexuality of woman is one such area. It is a taboo, not to be dwelt on and if it is to be discussed at all it is seen only as a lack. Bhabendra Nath Saikia (1932-2003), writer, director and academician is well known for his contribution in providing a new direction to Assamese literature. His work focuses on the myriad of complexities and conflicts in human relationships. His films like *Sandhyaraag* and *Agnisnan* shows his sensitive portrayal of women. His collection of short stories "Srinkhal" won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1976. Saikia also received the Assam Publication Board Award (1973), Assam Valley Literary Award (1990), Srimanta Sakardeva Award (1998) and Padma Shri in 2001.

Bhabendra Nath Saikia has portrayed the women characters in his stories in a very bold manner. In the story "Srinkhal" (1970) translated by Ranjita Biswas as "Fetters", Ambika is seen fighting to make both ends meet after the death of her husband, yet is unable to completely negate the desires lurking in her body, unfulfilled and insatiate. She is a mother of five and widowed at an early age but when she is reminded by Kalidas, she realises that she too has desires of her own:

Ambika lost her voice. She felt as if something was encircling her body-slowly, very slowly. She felt a strange restlessness exuding from the pores of her skin. Perhaps one felt like this when a snake wrapped itself onto a body. But strangely, she was not feeling scared. She should have felt a shiver at the cold touch of the snake. Instead, she was feeling warm (Saikia 16-17).

In another story "Durbikhya" (1969) translated as "Famine" Nandini, the daughter of a stationmaster who lives in a forlorn railway station would wait for the long trains that passed by her house morning and evening. She would revel in the appreciative glances and sometimes lewd remarks directed at her by the passengers who were enthralled by her lush young beauty :

The train passed by at just fifty yards from the fence. At this time too, Nandini's long hair spread like a fan on her back. The old saree she wore to bed at night lay crumpled carelessly on a body devoid of any wrinkles. As the train passed by, not a single pair of eyes missed her. Some passengers made peculiar noises seeing her, some stood at the open door and made meaningful gestures at her... After the train went out of sight, and before going to her mother, Nandini would suddenly remember about the state of her saree. She somehow ignored it before (Saikia 32-33).

In both these instances the female protagonist seems to be aware of herself as a sexual being with needs and desires of her own. While Ambika grapples with a decision to address those desires Nandini in her youthful exuberance flaunts her sexuality to a train load of people. In a society where women are taught to cover up their bodies and to behave in a "decent" manner even today, these characters who belonged to the 60s and 70s are certainly exceptional and even more remarkable is the fact that these are not creations of a female writer but an empathetic male writer. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse two stories of Bhabandranath Saikia "Bandar" or "Port"(1970) and "Raktim" or "The Blush"(1973). In both the stories Saikia has presented very bold female characters who are comfortable with their own sexual beings and have learnt to laugh at the world, making fools out of the worldlings.

"Port" is the story of Bandita Das whose father was a schoolteacher who had leased a brewery from the government. Bandita's mother was the second wife and she passed away when Bandita was very young. A good student Bandita nevertheless did not manage to pass her honours exam as she was busy with her additional talents. Talents which could be summed up in her musings about her change of surname after marriage :

Once she had luxuriated at the thought of how this surname would change one day. The promises, the vows that crowded her life almost in a procession made her often wonder in pleasureable anticipation as to what that surname was going to be at last. Bandita Majumdar, Bandita Chaudhary, Bandita Goswami, Bandita Roy, Bandita Kaur- there were many possibilities. When Amrik Singh had declared, "Without you, I'll die", she thought it was the end of her uncertainty about the new surname; so she would be Bandita Kaur. But a few days later, she was not sure. She could see another name floating up as if from behind the veil of a thick mist- could it be Bandita Goswami

after all? But now it was no use thinking about that distant past.

(Saikia 80-81)

She managed to find a soulmate in Ramananda Niyogi, they got married and Bandita is again plagued by doubts. Her husband could not bear her vivacious personality which made her popular at work. He began to behave like a sullen, offended lover and Bandita is forced to make a compromise for the sake of her marriage. She strikes a deal with her boss and makes use of her "additional talents" to secure a job for Ramananda :

Yes, she had to do it today. It was already getting too late; she must do it immediately. Somehow she must be able to forego the smell of another kind of blood. The smell of conjugal life was eluding her. It could not be tolerated, she was scared today. Never in her life had she felt this kind of fear gripping her mind....Ramananda must get the job. (Saikia 93)

Although Bandita might read like a traditional Indian wife who sacrifices her own personal good for the sake of her husband, she is not an ordinary woman. She has had numerous relations with men, knew men for what they were but never expresses any sense of guilt or shame. She views these liaisons as a normal affair as any man might do when he brags about his sexual conquests. She faces a moment of conflict and is plagued by doubts regarding the future of her marriage. She realised that the fragile male ego of Ramananda would not bear the fact of being a nobody for too long. She takes the matter into her hand and has the last laugh and a deal was struck in the cabin of a restaurant and a satiated officer provides her with the key to save her marriage- a job for Ramananda.

The second story "The Blush" or "Raktim" (1973) is about the life of three women Kuntala, Anurupa and Prabha , all three are inmates of Naari Kalyan Kendra, a shelter for female social outcastes. All three were victims of society's unjust sexual diktats but they have emerged victorious and have managed to laugh back at society, making fools of them. They were world weary and had gathered sufficient knowledge of the world and of man to make themselves street smart: " Kuntala and her friends were a clever lot. It took them less time to recognise a fool than make out their fathers' faces from a sepia-coloured photograph twenty-five years old."(Saikia 159)

Kuntala had become street smart at the age of eighteen. She did not belong to an affluent family and had managed to fool her father and her brother to fulfil her requirements. She had made use of the various opportunities to further her career but soon found out that the means to that end were not very trustworthy :

Fools, they were all fools. For eight years, she spent her time in the arms of some clever people in three different towns, did her matriculation, intermediate and graduation. At the age of twenty-six, she found that the people around her were getting foolish too. They

were scared that instead of being content in their arms, she was trying to clutch at somebody with her wornout body. Yes, they were fools. So, one day Kuntala ran away again. (Saikia 159)

It is not categorically stated under what circumstances Kuntala had to prostitute herself in order to educate herself but the truth exists that there were some people who were ready to exploit her condition and abused her sexually. Nevertheless Kuntala used her own body to empower herself and trained herself in a centre for handicrafts for three years and became a matron at Naari Kalyan Kendra.

Anurupa was somewhat a fool herself. She gave five years of her life to an artist with the hope of 'making the artist sing to her tune' but after five years of exploitation, the artist made her realise her own worth :

See Anurupa, you have to realise your own value. Who am I? Haven't you heard classical vocal music? What happens? For one raga, to create a tune, you need just one key line to carry the idea. Say 'Radha goes to the Yamuna river'. When the artiste goes on weaving the spell of the raga, with his singing and in his own interpretation, where do the words 'Radha' and 'Yamuna' stand? Is there any special value of the words? If instead of 'Radha' a 'Gadha' is used, there won't be any loss to the beauty of the Kheyal or Dhrupad. You're like these words. A means to echo the core of the song, a way to expand the bistaar of the raga." (Saikia 160)

Anurupa is made to realise that she is expendable and can be replaced by any 'Gadha' or a donkey without creating any ripple on the smooth surface of the artist's life. She had been used as a commodity, which could be easily thrown away after use. Anurupa took the course of her life in her own hands and went on to study sociology and completed a study on the women who were downtrodden and lead a miserable life in the dark lanes of the cities. She got a diploma and joined the Naari Kalyan Kendra and became a 'clever' woman, much more 'clever' than Kuntala or Prabha.

Prabha was a victim of an ill fated affair. Her small village came into prominence with the discovery of oil and brought her into contact with an engineer. When the engineer went to another site Prabha was left behind with the burden of an unwanted pregnancy. She came to the Naari Kalyan Kendra but no mention is made of the child in her womb. After the incident she developed enough sangfroid to advise other such victims to forget and carry on with their lives: "A time came when she could laugh away the woes of other girls by consoling them, 'Why do you go on crying? What's happened has happened. Forget it, start a new life'" (Saikia 161).

She became a matron at the Naari Kalyan Kendra.

All the three women are victims. The incidents that changed their lives would have been considered as insignificant if they had been a part of a man's life. However these women

were not to be outdone, instead of lamenting over their lot they had transformed their lives in such a manner that they could be beacons or guiding lights for other women victims. They had realised that they were fools and accordingly they extracted their revenge and empowered themselves by making fools of others and by becoming 'clever'. The quality of being clever is of prime importance to the three women. They do not bemoan their fate but are practical and consider the mishaps in their lives to be acts of foolishness rather than acts of exploitation. It is this perspective that had given them the strength to emerge as victors and to laugh back at the society and the world. Although they are still assailed by doubts at certain moments. In the beginning of the story the three women place themselves at a strategic position spatially. They take a position from where they can direct their gaze at others. Always a subject for other's scrutiny they have unknowingly assumed a position from where they can observe the folly of others. There was a three day excursion cum picnic for the inmates of the Naari Kalyan Kendra but the three women opted to stay back as they were tired of the routine trips made even more unbearable by the constant vigil of the super's wife. They find themselves with ample time in their hands and an unsuspecting victim :

The spot from where a person first comes into view as he passes by the gate tends to draw one's attention again and again, especially if there is nothing else to do. It now occupied Kuntala, Prabha and Anurupa as they sat on the topmost stair on the verandah at the front though they were doing it almost unconsciously. They sat without speaking to each other just like passengers of a train or motorcar who sometimes fall silent after hours of discussions on various subjects. Then all three of them saw a boy coming into view through the gap near the pillar" (Saikia 155)

The boy was a member of a local club who had come to sell lottery tickets. On any other day the three of them would have chased him away or would have come up with many excuses to avoid buying the tickets. On that particular afternoon too they did not have any intention of buying the tickets but they were ready to have some innocent fun at the boy's expense. They were surprised that the single boy could look at them boldly in the eye and the three of them came to a decision: "On other days, they would have given lots of excuses why they could not buy the tickets. But on this dull, monotonous afternoon, they wanted to have some fun with the boy. All of them mentally decided almost in unison, "Now that we have this foolish customer, let's spend some time amusing ourselves. No harm in ragging him a little". (Saikia 158).

Here we witness a role reversal as we seldom find a man at the mercy of women being "ragged" by the latter. Usually it is the woman who has to bear with such unpleasant circumstances. The poor unsuspecting boy did not have any clue regarding his plight and he obligingly even bared his body to prove how strong he was. Although this act can be read as

that of masculine bravado but the fact that the boy exposed his body to the gaze of the three women makes his position an interesting one: "As he said it, he folded up his shirt sleeve to show a little mound on his left arm bulging out like a small grinding mortar. Anurupa and Kuntala kept on staring at his arm. As that portion of the arms usually remained covered it looked white and smoother" (Saikia 164).

The three women seem to get back at the world of men by playing a cat and mouse game of power. The boy Shankar was as helpless and clueless amidst them. The three women are survivors and in their struggle for survival they have learnt a valuable lesson, never to be taken in and be made a fool of by man. However the societal conditioning that makes a woman look at her body in a certain way has its roots deeply entrenched in their minds. They are disturbed by Shankar's comment of a 'fused bulb' which looks perfectly alright from the outside but does not work. Again it is a preoccupation with their fading youth and sexuality which had been an essential part of their life stories. In both the stories "Port" and "The Blush" the body of the woman plays an important role either providing them with the means of deliverance as in the case of Bandita or imparting self knowledge and empowerment as in the case of Kuntala, Prabha and Anurupa. Their bodies have shaped their destinies and have written their fate. This reading of the stories takes them very close to what Helene Cixous calls "écriture feminine" although with a difference. Cixous insists that woman must write woman: "Woman must write herself: about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (Cixous 291).

The two stories that have been analysed talks about women's bodies, their desires and conflicts but with one exception, they have not been written by a woman but a man who has rendered the stories in a very sensitive manner. The anxieties of a woman who is trapped in a marriage and forced to compromise to save her marriage and pander to the husband's male ego, the dilemma of the three women ostracised from society yet still dreaming about a future and worrying about their ageing bodies have been very effectively narrated. The writing of woman's personal history is important and letting their bodies speak is essential. Cixous claims that: "Women un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenises and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield. In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history." (Cixous 289).

However a woman experiences a split whenever she charts out her personal story. A conflict between the public and the private. The question arises if there is a need to come to some sort of compromise between the two? Toni Morrison in her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" says: "There is a conflict between public and private life, and it's a conflict that I think ought to remain a conflict. Not a problem just a conflict. Because they are two modes of life that exists to exclude and annihilate each other." (Morrison 301)

It is in the midst of such conflicts and contradictions that a woman emerges stronger, a survivor and the women in Bhabendra Nath Saikia's stories "Port" and "The Blush" are survivors. What is remarkable is that these characters were not penned down by a woman but a male writer and in a period when Women's rights and liberation was not so well known or discussed in Assam. These characters seem to exude the "Laugh of the Medusa" :

We're stormy, and that which is ours breaks loose from us without our fearing any debilitation. Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we're not afraid of lacking. (Cixous 294).

However the question remains whether the characters would have been shaped differently if a woman writer had penned it down? Feminist critics seem to insist that only women writers should address the issues related to women. Luce Irigaray with her engagement with sexual difference is aware of phallogocentric system of knowledge and philosophy and reworks language in an attempt to formulate a feminine style of writing. She considers the position of male writers as ambiguous without a clear indication of their inclinations: "In other words the masculine is not prepared to share the initiative of discourse. It prefers to experiment with the speaking writing enjoying "woman" rather than leaving to the other any right to intervene, to "act", in her own interest". (Simons 107) A similar concern is also voiced by Helene Cixous who insists that only woman should write woman. It is significant that in the light of such critical insights Bhabendra Nath Saikia has achieved a remarkable feat in voicing the unspoken feelings and experiences of distressed women who seldom find a voice in civilised society. There is hardly a feel that the words that were penned down and which made the feelings of Kuntala ,Bandita and Anurupa come alive were crafted by a male hand. The writer does not sympathise with the characters but feels empathy for them and this has made the rendition of their woes so sensitive and real.

Works Cited

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