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Literature, Class and Hegemony: Need for a Gender Sensitive Window

Dr Manorama Sharma

It has often been said that literature is a mirror of society and to some extent there is truth in such a perception. But just as social scientists question the concept of homogeneity of society so also it is necessary to question the homogeneity of literature. Every creative writer belongs to some particular strata of the society and it is therefore only to be expected that the hegemonic ideas of the society influence a creative writer's perceptions of social reality. It is rightly said that Shakespeare reflected life in Elizabethan England, but it also needs to be asked which strata of the society of that England did he portray so truthfully? The value premises of which dominant class of that society did he critique or reflect? Most literary works will in one way or the other reflect the dominant value systems of the society. There are of course some exceptions to this- those who have in a way been able to rise above and move beyond such hegemonic class influences and create literature which may perhaps reflect a reality other than their immediate experiences. The mark of the dominant values in the society is perhaps best seen in the representations of gender relations in the society. Even the most sensitive representation of social experiences has at most times a very gender insensitive approach to the experiences of women. This is seen most well reflected in the stereotyping of the women and this stereotyping invariably cuts across the board. However this type of approach not only reflects the androcentric views of society as reflected in literature but also makes for a very interesting study of class and hegemony in the society.

Historians who have been trying to reconstruct more gender sensitive histories of societies have shown that men and women made civilisation together, that like men women have always been actors and agents in history, that women have shared with men the preservation of collective memory, that men and women have together created the oral traditions which have shaped the cultural traditions of the past. Merely writing about women or saying how women were marginalised and oppressed is not the end goal of gender sensitive portrayal of social reality. Although it is important to retrieve information about women so that their role in history making can be correctly assessed, yet such descriptions and retrievals

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often run the risk of remaining within the frame work of patriarchal writings on women. Gender history therefore goes far beyond mere collection and presentation of information. As Gerda Lerner has so rightly pointed out in her path breaking work *The Creation of Patriarchy* that while it is true that women have been victimised by many aspects of her long subordination to men, yet it would be a fundamental error to dwell only on that subordination alone and to conceptualise women primarily as victims. This would obscure the historical situation of women as essential and central to creating a society. The historical reality is that women have also been active agents in the making of history yet they have been relegated to the background or have become the hidden sex in the pages of history. It is this invisibility that gender sensitive analysis of society seeks to rectify so that a complete history of human civilisation would be written.

The construction of thought and consciousness are a product of human labour. As F.Engels puts it: "First came labour; after it, and then side by side with it, articulate speech." Literary cultures that develop do so in conformity with the material cultures that human beings create for their day to day existence. The main course of history therefore also determines the forms that literary cultures take in a society. A literary culture, if examined carefully, will therefore reflect ideas that are inherent in a process of social development and such ideas may not be very lucidly evident in the more conventional sources that historians generally use. The long years of subordination of the woman and the suppression of her creativity both within and outside the family has made the woman so invisible in the pages of, not only history, but of all other vehicles and instruments of social expressions that the task of retrieving her from that oblivion becomes a doubly difficult task. The woman has been submerged not so much by the fact of subordination as by the very deeply embedded androcentric perceptions of the society which have influenced both men and women alike. It is these perceptions which are reflected in various kinds of literary creations. The views about women which are carried and reflected in societal reflectors have helped in creating 'a woman' who is actually far removed from the reality that is 'the woman.' It is this real woman that we need to re-discover in any kind of feminist scholarship that develops in order to construct a gender friendly knowledge system. In the last decade or so there has been a lot of development in various fields of what one can call feminist scholarship and feminist writings. Such scholars have begun raising important issues on theoretical and conceptual dimensions of even questions like what is a woman or can there be a philosophy of "the woman. One of the important areas of focus in the development of a knowledge system on women has been the use of a truly interdisciplinary approach. In fact in the world of feminist literature Simon de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* stands out as an almost perfect example of the use of the real interdisciplinary method in philosophising on the woman. As Toril Moi rightly says that in the *Second Sex* Beauvoir "breaks down a host of generic boundaries as it freely moves to and from literature, memoirs, sociology, psychoanalysis, medicine, biology, history, art, and

philosophy." This is perhaps what is most essential to retrieve the woman from the layers of oblivion under which her true self actually has survived through centuries - to be more precise since written history began. To construct a new genre of feminist scholarship it is necessary to breakdown the boundaries of the conventional disciplines and view the woman through the prism of multi-layered realities where her true identity still vibrates.

The question however is how can we reconstruct the woman from the expressed realities and the embedded truths? One fruitful way of doing that could be a re-examination of some of the literary sources, both fictional and non-fictional. These sources need to be re-interpreted from a gender friendly perspective and see what they overtly say about the woman and why, and what actually lay hidden in them about the real woman in the society. That is a task that is sought to be taken up in the course of this paper. The image of the Asomiya woman has been constructed through and also reflected in various literary works over the last two centuries. This construct is a very patriarchal one which tries to conform the woman to certain very set norms. Why and how this has taken place is a question that we need to ask and that question needs to be answered against the backdrop of historical realities of the society in Assam.

By the end of the nineteenth century the Assamese middle class had begun to establish its hegemony over the society and as such the values, norms and preferences of that class came to permeate all the other sections of the society. It was this middle class that also was the forerunner in creating a literary culture in Assam by its conscious attempts at developing the Asomiya language. Through the Asomiya language a new Asomiya identity began to develop and this identity was to a large extent the construct of the Assamese middle class. The economic and social conditions in Assam in the second half of the nineteenth and twentieth century were such that there were practically no possibilities of the emergence of any other dominant class and therefore the middle class was able to exercise its hegemony over the society. Thus its views and values were reflected in the literary culture that it created and an Asomiya identity begins to take shape through that culture. The views of the middle class regarding gender relations also get reflected in this literary culture and thus there is a construct of the identity of the woman. It would be of great interest to see how the identity of the woman emerges through this middle class created literary culture from the last decades of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century. For this purpose I have taken for this paper an examination of two novels written in the beginning and the last decades of the twentieth century. This literary source, corroborated with other conventional historical sources, can be used to understand the perception of the woman that hegemonic values created about women.

The first novel taken up for discussion here is *Usa* written by Dinanath Sarma. The novel was written between 1933-1934 and it was first serialised in the *Asomiya* magazine *Awahan* in 1938-1939. It was only after 17 years that it was finally published in book form

in 1951. The main characters of the novel are Bipin, a college student when the novel begins and who later becomes a lawyer. He belonged to a village and was in the town for his college education and was being taken care of by a well-to do person, Barua. Binu, Barua's daughter studying in school and initially presented as smart, outspoken and proud and wearing modern clothes instead of the traditional Asomiya *Riha-mekhala*. Bipin initially dislikes her for being what he calls "modern" and therefore unwomanly. The third character is Usha, Barua's niece who had lost her parents and was being brought up by her aunt and uncle. She is portrayed by the author as a good middle class girl - shy, taking care of household responsibilities, dressing conventionally even though studying in school. Bipin is attracted towards her because she is the picture of what a woman should be. Although the novel is set during the Gandhian period of the nationalist movement, yet the women in the novel are not shown to have been exposed to any of those ideas which were influencing a large number of middle class women at that point of time. What the novel reflects about women is what the middle class perceptions of were. The qualities of the good woman, and the "unwomanly" characteristics as portrayed in the character of Binu. However when Binu's father decides to get her married to Bipin, Binu begins to change herself into a good woman and becomes docile, wearing traditional Asomiya clothes and Bipin begins to like her because she has become as he expresses it "more traditional and womanly." In the novel however the shy, traditional Usha comes through as the stronger and more determined character, She had loved Bipin and when he did not marry her she decided to remain unmarried and she also broke off the marriage which her uncle had arranged for her. In this presentation of the two female characters one sees the general dilemma of hegemonic values of the newly educated middle class as to what a good woman is.

Moving on now to the last quarter of the twentieth century we take up for analysis a novel written in the 1970s but which forms an important part of the developing Asomiya literary culture and which fictionalises the historical events of the period of 1942. The novel *Mrityunjay* written by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya is also important for the fact that although written in 1970 it can be considered a contemporary novel because the author himself was closely associated with the events he was writing about; at least the locale was familiar to him being a political activist himself. This novel also went on to win the *Gyanpith* award for literature. The novel is based on the period of the 1942 Quit India movement and is centred around certain places in the *Nowgong* district of central Assam. It is a very gripping narration of the dilemma that many congress volunteers of that time were going through - whether to remain non-violent in the Gandhian way or to take the path of violence as atrocities of the army and police on the common people were increasing and the Gandhian movement seemed unable to take the country towards independence. *Mrityunjay* is the story of a group of congress volunteers who believed that more direct action against the British state was needed and who became a part of the plan to derail a train that was carrying army personnel.

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The story would be of interest to historians in general who would wish to use literary sources as corroboration for documentary evidences. But it also has interest for those historians looking for the identity of the woman in the literary cultures. During the Nationalist movement women had been encouraged, particularly by Gandhi, to come out of the four walls of their homes to help their men in the struggle for the freedom of the country. Mrityunjay also reflects this reality and women have been depicted both as activists and sympathisers and also as the victims of army atrocities. Interestingly however most of the women have been presented in their political roles because of the involvement of their husbands except one woman, Koli Baideo. This woman is presented as an independent fearless woman, but she is depicted as a widow whose husband died while she was quite young, and having no family support she was brought to the congress camp. In a careful reading of the novel one sees two kinds of women being portrayed. The idea of the 'respectable' woman in whose case there is no concept of autonomy or independent identity outside the fold of the men's identity. As an example one can see the wife of the Gossain of the Doipara Satra (the place from where the actual events of the novel begin) who, despite all her (according to the author) natural "feminine" dilemmas and weaknesses finally takes courage from her husband's involvement in the movement and becomes a sympathiser and a collaborator to some extent. Mention of other such socially considered "respectable" women are there too whose political consciousness and sense of identity are all a part of their husbands' political consciousness and the support they expect from their wives. The idea of the autonomy and self determination of the woman however does emerge in the novel but such qualities are presented in women who are either not considered "respectable" by the Asomiya middle class or are outside the parameters of that society. An example of such a woman is seen in the character of Dimi who belongs, as Bhattacharyya writes, to the "Mikir" tribe, and married to a Garo. She is presented as a fearless independent character having the courage to defy even her husband and other men in her society to help the revolutionaries because of her attachment to and trust in a man (Dhanpur) she had known before her marriage. The significant aspect of Dimi's relationships are that they are her decisions and she sees nothing wrong in the fact that she can have a very emotional attachment to another man while still loving her husband and being dutiful to him. Confusions are brought to her mind by the police officer Saikia and one of the revolutionaries, Joyram, both of whom ask her how she could feel so strongly about Dhanpur when she had her own husband. She reacts to such questions in a manner which actually shows the point that if women could think independently, outside the socialisation process of the patriarchal system, she would have very healthy ideas about relationships. Dimi tells herself that these are questions that men ask and she did not know how to answer them. The only thing that she could feel with certainty was that she had her own aspirations and the strength to give expressions to those aspirations.

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The characterisations of the women characters in Bhattacharyya's literary creations actually depict two realities: the rising awareness about women's identity as being brought forth by the feminist movements of the twentieth century and the reality which the Asomiya middle class values would be ready to acknowledge. In fact from the early decades of the twentieth century a sense of awareness about their identity was beginning to emerge. As early as 1928 the first women's magazine in Asomiya, "Ghar Jeuti", was being published which focussed on issues like women's education, widow remarriage, self-dependence of women, and bringing before the women news about women from other countries as well. There were also a number of literary works published at this same period, most written by men, which did bring into focus many women related issues. Here we see the influence of the ideas of both the nineteenth century Bengal renaissance and the emerging nationalist movement particularly Gandhi's encouragement to women. The main focus of the literary creations of this period however was on issues like child widows, widow remarriage and the education of women. The approach was more reformatory than revolutionary and so there was no questioning of the patriarchal subordination of the women and so the Asomiya literary culture still presented a very patriarchal picture of the identity of the women and thus the socialisation process was still dominated by those values. Therefore the 1942 social consciousness regarding women that get reflected in Bhattacharyya's work is a mixture of the contemporary realities and the 1970s awareness of the women's question. This shows that a consciousness of the identity of the woman was beginning to emerge in the 1970s which Bhattacharyya seeks to present through the character of Dimi, but the Asomiya middle class values were still not ready to acknowledge this reality and therefore the author creates the characters of the socially acceptable "respectable" women.

In a space of half a century, through these two literary works we see that middle class hegemony has not been challenged and the dominant views in the Asomiya society regarding women are still the very Victorian ideas about women, the ideas to which the western educated middle class was largely exposed. Yet we do need to ask this question as to why it was necessary to highlight the characteristics of the good woman. It was because the woman who is an agent of history, and who is not a victim of history always, existed in the society and the patriarchal norms demanded that this vibrant woman needs to be marginalised. The articulate, modern Binu, the independent and assertive Dimi are also real women who have side by side with men created society and civilization. The very fact that two women in 1927 could start a woman's magazine and run it for well over four years is ample proof of the fact that women were not always the picture created by the patriarchal notions. Beyond and outside those notions existed the real history of women. This is the reality which we need to try and see and not be carried away by the hegemonic values represented in literary works. This would provide the gender sensitive window for a holistic understanding of social realities and for challenging the dominant, patriarchal perceptions about women.

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References and Notes

1. This issue has been discussed by many scholars working on gender history. See amongst others Lerner, Gerda, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, OUP, 1986; Rose, Sonya O., *What is Gender History*, Polity Press, 2010; Meade, Teresa A. and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (eds), *A Companion to Gender History*. Blackwell Publishing, 2004 [2006 rep.]; Beard, Mary R, *Women as a Force in History*, Macmillan, 1946.
2. See Lerner, Gerda, op.cit.
3. Engels, F, *Dialectics of Nature*, p.284.
4. This idea has been discussed by David Craig, "Towards Laws of Literary Development" in Craig, David (ed.) *Marxists on Literature : An Anthology*. Penguin Books, 1975, pp134-159.
5. In Works like Moi, Toril, *What is A Woman?* OUP, 1999, and Mohanty, Chandra Talapade, *Feminism Without Borders*. Duke University Press, 2006 [5th printing]); interesting debates have been raised on the question of the identity of the woman and the representation of the woman in various mediums of representation.
6. Moi, Toril, op. cit. p. 125.
7. The issue of the hegemony of the middle class in Assam has been discussed by us in Sharma, Manorama. *Social and Economic Change in Assam: Middle Class Hegemony* (Ajanta International Publishers, Delhi, 1993).
8. The term Asomiya is used here to refer to that identity which is created by the language as distinct from the word Assamese which is used to refer to all those who have accepted Assam as their homeland but may have separate identities. This distinction was first made in Baruah, A. K. & Manorama Sharma, "Promises to Keep" in *North East Quarterly* Vol.2, No2 1987 . Subsequently this has been accepted by a number of other scholars working on Assam.
9. See Sharma, Manorama, *Social and Economic Change in Assam* , op. cit. for a detailed discussion of this issue.
10. Bhattacharyya, Birendra Kumar, *Mrityunjay*. Assam Book Depot, Calcutta, 1970.
11. Mahanta, Aparna (ed.). *Ghar Jeuti*. Asom Prakashan Parishad, Guwahati, 2008.
12. See Devi, Mira. "Asomiya Sahityat Naribadi Chinta," in Sibnath Barman et al (eds.). *Asomiya Nari: Aitijya aru Uttaran*. Guwahati, 2002. p.106.