

Voices for the Voiceless: Representation of Women in Homen Borgohain's "The Fisherman's Daughter"

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Abstract:

The literary landscape of post-colonial India is dominated by an incessant concern of the authors for the oppressed and the subjugated because of social prejudices born out of social and gender hierarchy. Be it poetry, drama or fiction, Indian literature has avowedly expressed a singularity of mirroring the society as it is and literature from Assam is not an aberration. Assamese authors have given unremitting effort to make literature a discourse on issues, such as casteism, class consciousness and above all the woman question in a male-controlled society. Homen Borgohain's "The Fisherman's Daughter" is such a novella which shows that while most of the men and women are followers of an established social order, exception is also found and it manifests itself in the form of a woman who can bring about transformation of a society or, at least, be a voice for the voiceless. These are the aspects the present paper attempts to discuss and analyse.

Keywords: Assamese literature, casteism, class consciousness, gender hierarchy, social hierarchy

It was a dominant tendency among the 20th century writers of Assamese fiction to make their writings a vehicle for social criticism through a realistic portrayal of various societal issues. However, there were very few authors who genuinely paid their attention to voice for the marginalized population who were made voiceless by circumstances and, more particularly, because of social hierarchy which had stratified human beings into caste and class giving a section 'higher social status than others' (Zachary C. Roth 5054-60). Among the rare archetypal authors, who voices for the voiceless, Homen Borgohain (1932-2021) is undoubtedly a prolific name. What makes his writings unique is his presentation of characters which are taken 'from the real world' (Pisharoty) and themes which are concerned with 'harsh truth about human life' (Das 2479-81). He has written more than ten novels, plenty of short stories, non-fictional books along with a few autobiographies and most of them are concerned with social issues. Following a method of discussion and analysis, this

paper deconstructs his “The Fisherman’s Daughter” translated by Pradipta Borgohain from “Matsya Gandhya” (1987) and published in the anthology *The Collected Works of Homen Borgohain* (2017) to explore representation of women in the concerned novella, voices of the marginal women and to see how far he conforms to and departs from the traditional notion entrenched in gender hierarchy.

The protagonist of the novella is a woman belonging to Kaibarta community, named Meneka, who grows in a social environment in which her community undergoes the ordeals of suppression, repression, exploitation and humiliation in every walk of life and which eventually enable her to voice against the injustices meted out to her community. The novella shows how the personal experiences of Meneka become collective experiences of the whole community. The author introduces Maneka through an incident in which she overhears two wayfarers repeatedly uttering the word ‘dom’ in their conversation and one of them even explaining how smell of raw, smoked and burnt fish is the identity of a dom village (Borgohain, *The Fisherman's Daughter* 6). The word ‘dom’ is enough to spark off Meneka’s fury which forces her to retaliate instantly. It should be noted that the word ‘dom’ was once used by the upper caste people in their day-to-day conversation to identify the Kaibartas, a fishing community. It is such a word which the community considered as undignified and contemptuous. Historically, the term has been associated with discriminatory behaviour and also contains elements of untouchability. In 1881 census, a distinction was made by categorizing the Kaibartas into two folds - ‘halwa kewats’ (the Kaibartas engaged in cultivation) and ‘nadiyals’ or ‘Kaibartas’ (the Kaibartas engaged in fishing). The census accorded higher status to the former and, much lower status to the later (Saikia 272). However, though there was no place for official use of the term ‘dom’, in ordinary conversation the upper caste people continued to articulate it which kept on widening the social as well as psychological gap between the two communities. Hence, like most of the Kaibartas, Meneka also cherishes deep resentment toward the upper caste communities and an untold agony for being born in a deprived community.

The author narrates some of the incidents witnessed by Meneka to explain how Kaibartas are humiliated and reminded of their existence as untouchable in every walk of life. When she was six years of age, she sometimes used to accompany her mother, Memeri, to barter fish for paddy or to sell fishes from door to door and for that purpose one day they happened to visit the household of an Ahom community where tender-aged Meneka touched a basket of rice. As the lady had seen Meneka touching the basket, immediately she slapped her and also scolded Memeri for not preventing her from touching the basket. In her rage, the lady shouted with the expression that she would have to throw away the whole basket of grain. Memeri made a frail attempt to defend her tiny daughter with the words,

‘Lady, so this ignorant little daughter of mine went and stood near the grain in stupidity. But need you have given her such a slap for that? We may be of the lower races, but we are still humans, not cats or dogs’ (10).

However, such attempt on her part maddened the lady so much that she retaliated through the words,

‘What did you say, Dom? How dare you? When the daughter of a Dom casts her shadow and damages the entire basket of grain, am I supposed to keep mum?’ (10).

She then called Poornaram to move away and feed his bullocks the whole basket of rice as it had been damaged by the ‘daughter of a Dom’ (10). As she grows up, she observes that even if anyone from Kaibarta community becomes thirsty and begs an upper caste household for some drinking water, he or she is required to tear off a big arum leaf from roadside and the upper caste householder pours water only on the leaf. Again, if any Kaibarta boy is employed as a cowherd and the children of that genteel household happens to accidentally touch him, those children are required to take a bath and cleanse themselves instantly. Meneka also knows how her husband had to abandon schooling only because of ill treatment meted out to him by both upper caste Hindu teachers and students.

The author makes Meneka a representative voice of the Kaibartas and hence her anger against the upper caste people has to be considered in a collective level. When Kamala narrates the whole series of happenings, ignoring personal animosity she resolves not to abort the foetus from Kamala’s womb, but to compel Moniram, an Ahom boy, to stay as a residential-son-in-law in Kamala’s house abandoning his clan, race and family. From the very next day Meneka embarks on her mission and as a first step she tries to convince Moniram to wed Kamala. Initially, just like a responsible guardian, Meneka tries to persuade Moniram to discuss the issue with his parents. The manner in which she exchanges words compels him to think that he is seeing ‘a Meneka completely different from the Meneka he knew’ (72). While this transformation of Meneka is for breaking the supremacy of the upper caste people by exposing their hypocrisies, it is also an answer to prolonged social discrimination, disparity and deprivation. So, she does not vacillate to put aside personal animosity and transforms herself into a guardian and protector, though, as considered by Moniram, her relation with Kamala’s family was like that of ‘snake and mongoose’ (70). Anyway, he does not find any way to save himself from the wrath of Meneka as well as backlash from his own community and eventually this helplessness forces him to wed Kamala and start staying in her house as a residential son-in-law.

The author puts all the five other women characters - Memeri, Beula, Kamala, an unnamed upper caste woman and Moniram’s mother - in a totally dissimilar situation so that the readers can get a glimpse of women’s perspective in various affairs, be it societal, personal, familial and most importantly how circumstances force a woman to act in a particular manner. In Memeri’s case it is the premature death of her husband which forces her to become a serving and fish selling woman since her husband’s sudden demise left her with no other option, but to do any work for supporting herself and her two young daughters. Here, one can see woman’s participation in economic activities and her capability of shouldering all the responsibilities despite hardships. Beula is another woman character, who is considered by Meneka as one of the main causes of her distress. She and Meneka got married to Joyhari and Purna respectively, the sons of Digambar from the same village. After marriage, while Joyhari’s industrious nature makes him a wealthy person, Purna, unlike his elder brother, suffers from acute poverty because of his sloth and unindustrious nature. It is such a situation which puts them amidst bitter rivalry forcing Digambar to divide his wealth between his two sons and sending Purna and Meneka off to live separately in a small hut. In such distressing moments also Beula does not take part in any activity that could have reduced the misunderstanding between them and could have restrained Meneka from accusing Beula as the sole cause of her distress. Beula’s silence can implicitly be described as her adherence to a set family order and insistence on her preference for continuing a prosperous life. Kamala, on the other hand, represents a type of women who are conscious of

their downtrodden state and so they want to avoid that state by getting married to a person having wealth and social status. Kamala herself admits that her love relationship with Moniram is also based on her dream of getting married to someone having a government job or with sufficient wealth. She confesses before Meneka in the following way,

‘I thought – Moniram is not a clerk or Mohori, but he owned four puras of cornfield. If he married me, I’d also become the owner of all that land, I’d go and reap corn in my own land. I’d carry away grain from my field to store in my own bin...’ (65)

This confession of Kamala affirms her desire for a better life. Eventually, when she becomes pregnant and is deserted by him, she realizes how she has been duped for being a Kaibarta girl. She is well aware that pre-marital pregnancy is a taboo in her society and she would have committed suicide had she did not get the opportunity of narrating her story to Meneka and had she did not get her support.

Moreover, there is an unnamed woman who happens to be from upper caste. This is the woman who contemptuously scolded six-year-old Meneka and Memeri ruthlessly and slapped Meneka for touching a rice filled container. It is the incident which teaches Meneka the first lesson on untouchability and the first feeling of being born as untouchable. The author has made her the representative of a type of upper caste women who can easily give a blind eye to the condition of a helpless widow with her hunger-stricken child in the name of untouchability. Further, Moniram’s mother, who helplessly observes Moniram’s death rituals, is also a product of upper caste supremacy.

In this way, the author, apart from giving an idea about how untouchability prevailed in 19th- 20th century Assamese society, has also made the women characters in this novella represent various outlooks that persist in a society. Firstly, through Memeri, the author shows woman’s participation in economic activity and woman’s capability of shouldering hardships – a similar notion harboured by Monimala in “Spring in Hell” (Borgohain, Spring in Hell 355-89). Secondly, he shows that women as a whole cannot be cowed by social and gender hierarchy; there must be aberration and Meneka is an example. Meneka, unlike all other women, can be a cause for bringing about a great alteration in society by making her community realize that they also have honour and dignity. This feeling of the Kaibartas gets avowed expression in the reaction of a Kaibarta man ‘Today itself the lord of the Doms will elevate him into the fold’ (86) in response to a question concerning the celebration in Kaibarta village after an Ahom boy abandons his clan, race, family and parents to become a residential-son-in-law. Thirdly, the author shows how personal rivalry or antagonism becomes subordinate to the larger commitment to a community. In Meneka’s case, she leaves aside her enmity with Kamala and her family to fight against injustice being done to her community. Finally, while the novel shows that no community remains in a state of suppression, humiliation, disregard and disparagement forever, voices like that of Meneka have the power to eradicate the evils in a society by compelling the preachers of age-old social system to relook afresh at the hierarchical norms and by sprinkling a new optimism at the downtrodden for a sensible society.

One must remember that though “The Fisherman’s Daughter” was translated in the second decade of the 21st century, the novella is essentially a product of the 20th century as it was first published as an Assamese novel entitled “Matsya Gandha” in 1987 CE. Hence, the issues which have been raised are all in the context of 20th century Assamese society and the

basic purpose of the author is to bring about reformation through a realistic portrayal of the society. With the passage of time, especially in the 21st century, the society has undergone significant changes. Though caste distinction still exists more or less even in the 21st century, the act of treating a caste as untouchable has diminished to a great extent. Borgohain demonstrates how, contrary to the prevailing notion of femininity, woman can play a vivacious role in societal affairs voicing for the eradication of untouchability and social as well as gender inequality. Herein lies his departure from the conventional notion that women are born only for breeding children and shouldering household responsibilities. A similar notion loomed large in the 19th century British society and, breaking the convention, Thomas Hardy established through his portrayal of Miss Newberry, a character in his short story "The Distracted Preacher", that women are in no way inferior to men in shouldering responsibility and in taking independent decisions. In Borgohain's "The Fisherman's Daughter" Meneka does not have the kind of refinement that Miss Newberry possesses because of their dichotomous existence, but they can be compared with each other. Above all, the uniqueness of this novella lies in its concern for the unprivileged and for incorporating a fisherman's daughter as a voice for the voiceless.

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