

The Diverse Female Characters Of Lakshminath Bezbaruah's Short Stories : An Overview

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Abstract

Lakshminath Bezbaruah is the father of Assamese Short Stories. Along with the contemporary Assamese society, the background of his stories also included the population of Orissa and Bengal. By inventing stories out of those backgrounds, Bezbaruah has painted the joys and sorrows, the laughter and tears, and the ups and downs of the men and women of his time. Among his subjects, Bezbaruah has given special attention to his female characters. Many of his stories highlight the issues of woman rights, woman's independent identity and woman's position in a patriarchal social structure. Our discussion here throws light on the female characters reflected in these eight stories, namely 'Bhadari', 'Jayanti', 'Patmugi', 'Laliti Kakoti', 'Jene Sur Tene Taangun', 'Malati', 'Xeuti' and 'Sur'.

Key Words- Divers, Woman, Short Stories.

Preface:

Short story is an integral part of Lakshminath Bezbaruah's literary oeuvre. Bezbaruah, who opened up the portal of Assamese short story by publishing 'Xeuti' in the nineteenth century 'Jonaki' (Vol. 4, Issue 4), continued composing and publishing in the magazines like 'Jonaki', 'Bahi' and others. Initially a composer of folk tales, Bezbaruah made his entrance to the genre of short story and left the readers with four collections- *Xurobhi* (1909), *Xadhukothar Kuki* (1910), *Junbiri* (1913), and *Kenhukali* (Collected and Edited by Atul Chandra Hazarika, 1968).

Literature is the mirror of society. It brings into life all the aspects of a community or a society. We perceive an artistic view of the social realities in the branches of realistic literature like the story or the novel. That is why the historical value of this type of literature is infinite. The realistic picture of the then society comes into light through the works of Lakshminath Bezbaruah, the father

of Assamese short story. Along with the contemporary Assamese society, the background of his stories also included the population of Orissa and Bengal. By inventing stories out of those backgrounds, Bezbaruah has painted the joys and sorrows, the laughter and tears, and the ups and downs of the men and women of his time. Among his subjects, Bezbaruah has given special attention to his female characters. Loaded with minute observational skills Bezbaruah has sketched the female characters with a sympathetic heart. Many of his stories highlight the issues of woman rights, woman's independent identity and woman's position in a patriarchal social structure. In some of such stories, he has painted woman as the icon of tolerance, restraint, sacrifice and love. On the other hand, there are some stories that portray women as protesting, rebellious and courageous characters. Our discussion here throws light on the female characters reflected in these eight stories, namely 'Bhadari', 'Jayanti',

‘Patmugi’, ‘Laliti Kakoti’, ‘Jene Sur Tene Taangun’, ‘Malati’, ‘Xeuti’ and ‘Sur’.

Area of Research:

The short stories of Lakshminath Bezbaruah and the essays on Bezbaruah’s short stories are the area of the research. *Bezbaruah Rachanawali* edited by Nagen Saikia published in 2011 is selected as the primary source and the area of the study. The area of the research of this article is to highlight the divers female characters of Lakshminath Bezbaruah’s short stories.

Objective of the study:

The study deals with the following objective.....

- * The primary objective of the paper is to discuss about the divers female character’s in the Lakshminath Bezbaruah’s short stories.

- * To give an idea about the short stories of Lakshminath Bezbaruah.

- * To guide the young researcher to a new area of research.

Methodology adopted:

This research article is based on primary and secondary sources. Short stories collection of Lakshminath Bezbaruah are used as primary sources and relevant books, essays, articles, journals, magazines are used as secondary sources. A proper scientific research methodology will maintain in the paper. The methodology of this article is based on descriptive and analytical approach. The seventh edition of *MLA Handbook* is taken to indicate the information, raise statements and mention bibliography.

Subject Matter:

‘Bhadari’ is undoubtedly a successful story to ooze out from the cup of Lakshminath Bezbaruah. Based on the background of the then Assamese rural public life, its protagonist Bhadari is a traditionally submissive, chaste Assamese woman who tolerates her husband in spite of the injustice and cruelty bestowed upon her. Bhadari is a woman qualified with qualities like sacrifice, kindness, forgiveness, tolerance and the like. Her husband Sisuram, a general farmer, frequently slaps and boxes her without any particular or definite cause.

Bhadari silently suffers and tolerates thinking that it’s a woman’s due. She cannot protest against her husband Sisuram. However, on one particular day, Bhadari with her face filled with watery nose and teary eyes because of blowing air to ignite raw firewood gets angry and protests against Sisuram who was creating havoc because of Bhadari being late to serve him food. Though Bhadari talks back to her husband this time, her protest is, however, just momentous. Because even when Sisuram, in a fit of rage, lands two blows with the ‘Moida’ (a curved knife with stand for dressing and cutting fish, vegetables etc.) on her back which leaves her almost dead, she takes the entire blame on herself in order to save her husband from the grasp of law. The effort to free her husband from prison time by giving the statement that the cuts on her back occurred when she tripped herself and fell on the ‘Moida’ while going to cut fish exposes an important aspect of Bhadari as a character. In spite of tolerating all the atrocities she does not fall back in thinking about the well-being of her husband; her qualities of devotion towards her husband and her endurance marks the character’s prominence. The touch of Bhadari’s generosity was able to change the mentality of even a cruel and angry person like Sisuram.

In stark contrast to his portrayal of an enduring, self-sacrificing and traditional woman in his story ‘Bhadari’, Bezbaruah through the medium of his story ‘Laliti Kakoti’ brings forward the revolutionary and progressive mindset of a woman. The view that a woman can be self-sufficient and lead an independent life without the support of a male counterpart is expressed through the character of the protagonist Laliti. According to the story, her parents marry Laliti off to a sub-deputy magistrate. However, she returns to her mother’s house, as she was not able to bear the cruelty of her husband. Her husband, a man with modern education, engages in a second and third marriage. Instead of breaking down with sorrow for her husband’s acts, she writes a protesting letter to her husband-

“The way you
abandoned me, I too
have full right to
deem you unworthy
and abandon

you...That a woman has no other work to be successful in this world other than getting married, serving her husband and nurturing the children – Kumari Laliti Kakoti does not agree to this.” (‘Laliti Kakoti’ 249)

Such statement by Laliti lets us know that Laliti is much aware about self-independence. She does not confine to the idea of sacrificing her desires, ambitions, dreams and self-independence for marriage and children. According to her, there are thousands of areas through which a woman can lead a successful life apart from the discipline and slavery of marriage. It is not that Bezbaruah’s Laliti is only aware about self-independence. His Laliti is equally aware of the social structure. Laliti sharply contempt the prevalent societal view that the parents and the daughter would rot in hell if they did not marry off the daughter in time. According to the Indian tradition, a woman is a man’s better half. The western educated Laliti’s husband also call her his better half. However, in reality, he treats her as none other than an animal. He whimsically slaps and tortures her without any particular reason. This is why Laliti questions her husband-

“Traditional education regarded a woman as an integral part of a man’s life; your modern western education calls it “better half”. But, is it appropriate to call someone a better half and then treat them worse than a man treats a cow or a buffalo?” (‘Laliti Kakoti’ 248)

Laliti readily protests the rules and regulations imposed by the patriarchal society and expresses that a woman also shares the same right as of man to call her partner unworthy and abandon him.

It can be said that Bebaruah’s Laliti Kakoti is a type of self-conscious woman who courageously demands self-independence and makes her own rules in an otherwise patriarchal social system and, therefore, gives effort to affirm her prestige and self-establishment. That is why, without being concern about her personal joys and sorrows, she is motivated to work and help serve the hurt and the needy persons of the society.

Jayanti, the protagonist of Lakshminath Bezbaruah’s story named ‘Jayanti’, is an intelligent and courageous woman. According to the author, Jayanti is virtuous like Sabitri, beautiful like Kamala, and as lucky as Sasi. She is a good homemaker, an expert weaver, and a skilled singer of devotional songs. When such a talented and qualified Jayanti fell into the hands of the Burmese, she initially becomes perplexed. However, she gathers courage instantaneously and is able to use her presence of mind. Accustomed to self-restraint and wit, Jayanti lures the Burmese back into her house by saying that the property and gold lay buried under the courtyard. When the Burmese men finish digging up the courtyard she pushes the men into it and, in an instant, decapitates all three of them using their sword. By tactfully handling the complicated situation, she is able to protect her piety as well as free her husband from the clutches of the Burmese. However, because of committing the heinous act of murder she begins to lose her mental equilibrium and gradually leans towards the cold lap of death. The witty and courageous nature of Bezbaruah’s character of Jayanti is a motivation to all women.

Patmugi is a remarkable female character of Lakshminath Bezbaruah’s short story. Through this female character included in the short story ‘Patmugi’, the author is able to show the hidden side of female psychology. The Brahmin’s son, who charmed by the beauty of Patmugi lived in his in-laws house, leaves her and remarries another woman after atonement. Aggrieved of the deceit and fraud by her husband, Patmugi goes to the court accompanied by her paternal uncle. On their way, the uncle climbed up an elephant-apple tree looking for water, but when he looks at the beauty of Patmugi from above he feels a strange sensation in his heart.

Though Patmugi initially gets elated by knowing about her fifty-year-old uncle's feelings, she gradually acquires new knowledge about men. That is why by saying that she wants to see the proof of deception, cruelty and weakness inherent in a man she returns from the court without filing any complaint. She gives up all efforts to win back her husband. In the end, just like Laliti Kakoti, Patmugi also decides to dedicate her life for public welfare. Her resort to dedicate her life in serving the poor and the needy by following Gandhian non-violence principles throws light to her feminist thoughts.

It is not true that Lakshminath Bezbaruah has assembled only the generous, tolerant, protesting, rebellious and intelligent women characters in his stories. Rather, female characters driven by inhuman motives like maliciousness, jealousy, enviousness and the like also find place in his works. We can perceive such cruelty of woman in the first Assamese short story to come out of Lakshminath Bezbaruah's oeuvre 'Xeuti'. The storywriter gives a hint of the cruelty of female mind through the two characters of 'Xeuti'- the groom's mother and his elder sister. The hateful behavior of the groom's mother and elder sister towards the newly wedded bride Xeuti, just because she shares some kind of relation to the family, is truly inhuman. Not satisfied by agonizing Xeuti with mental and physical torture, the widowed elder sister conspires with the mother to kill Xeuti and eventually murder her by poisoning her food. The act of killing Xeuti without any hesitation in order to save their honor sheds light into the dangerous side of a woman's mind. Their inability to understand a woman's pain and suffering by being women themselves marks them as disgrace to the entire female gender.

Bezbaruah's story called 'Sur' also expresses the ruthlessness of the female mind. The dexterity of Lankeshwar Baruah's second wife is so much so that within a very short span of time she was able to make him hate his first wife's son Chandra. By befriending her ex-lover, she plots against her husband and commits the heinous act of murder by poisoning his water cup.

Conclusion:

The diversity of Lakshminath Bezbaruah's female characters come to the four when we analyze them in this manner. By perceiving his contemporary society judiciously, he has been able to portray such diverse female characters in his stories. While some silently tolerate the atrocities and cruelties of husband by simply accepting their fate, there are others who courageously protest and fight against such ruthlessness. If there is someone who courageously saves her husband from the wicked, another saves herself from husband's cruelty by using her wit tactfully. On one hand, a woman's touch of generosity is able to melt down the cold-hearted man; while on the other, a man falls victim and meets his end to the ruthlessness of a woman. The assemblage of such diverse female characters in his short stories provides them with a unique dimension.

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