



A RE-READING OF BINA BARUAH'S "JIVANAR BATAT": A SEARCH FOR FEMALE IDENTITY

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Abstract

The present paper, *Re-reading of Bina Barua's Jivanar Batat: A Search for Female identity* puts forth the question of identity particularly of women and for that Bina Barua's (Birinchi Kumar Barua) epoch-making novel, *Jivanar Batat*, written during colonial period and published in 1944 has been taken up for thread-bare discussion on the mentioned topic, a burning research problem for the students, researchers, academicians and everyone living through this postcolonial era. With the passage in time, conditions, ideologies and facts of life have changed a lot, making revolutionary developments in the conceptions, perceptions and appropriations of various notions including the question of identity and how to develop and sustain it despite challenges of life. Here the multidimensional roles played by the central character of the novel, Tagar amidst critical situations in her life and her assertion of unique personality and maintaining an individual identity, responding equally well to the conventional demands as well as the modernist values has been described. A textual analysis has been made from the gender perspective which also talks about the patriarchal dictations subjugating the women by portraying them in a stereotypical manner. Thus the search for female identity keeping the character of Tagar at the centre becomes the crux of the story. Re-reading the story from different perspectives will lay bare the underlying meanings of it particularly with regard to crisis in identity, quest for it and its attainment.

Key Words: Bina Barua, Female Identity, Gender, Jivanar Batat , Patriarchy, Postcolonial.

A search for female identity has been a major research problem in postcolonial era when new equations of life are being set because of radical changes occurring in socio-economic, political, psychological and literary aspects of human life. Feelings, emotions, thoughts and ideas, customs, rituals, sagas, chronicles, and knowledge embedded in literature and fine arts are appropriated and negotiated as a result of cross-cultural and trans-cultural exchanges, as geographical expansion and further exploration and travel made

unheard heard, undiscovered discovered, unsung sung, an unprecedented development in postcolonial world. Particularly, societies with colonial past have automatically developed a different perspective altogether in postcolonial era with respect to all the aspects of life and women being the victim of multiple processes of colonisation suffer from chronic identity crisis. Thus to look at a particular text, written during colonial period representing the then Assamese society in the best possible manner, Bina Barua's *Jivanar Batat* becomes a fertile ground for gender-related discourses with special focus on the distressing identity crisis. Gender is, however, a socio-cultural phenomenon which determines the social structure and the status of men and women in the society. Gender awareness benefits individuals, communities and organisations opening up new vistas of options, conditions, experiences and orientations. It reflects existing power-relationship in any given society. Deep understanding of gender patterns, dynamics, and particularly the feminist movement has given a new dimension to it. The term 'gender' was adopted by the feminists to emphasise the social shaping of femininity and masculinity to challenge the idea that relation between woman and man were ordained by nature. Feminism, also known as 'womanism' now a-days is a serious attempt to formulate the issue and find solutions to gender problems. The treatment of gender question has gained momentum in view of the present empowerment and assertion movements all over the world with the introduction of various acts, schemes, proposals and grants for women and girls in recent past ensuring rights and privileges to the half sky though its proper implementation is still a distant cry in certain sectors. Gender studies, now-a-days, have given a new dimension and perspective to the issues of crisis in identity and quest for identity addressing both the male and female community as such following which a rethinking of masculinity along with the rethinking of femininity has come into being. Feminist criticism has thus the major object of exposing the mechanism of patriarchy, the socio-cultural mind-set and exploring ways to promote a mind shift. It states that women are not born feminine and men not born masculine. Thus Simon de Beauvoir, the French philosopher, novelist, theorist and essayist in her well known treatise *The Second Sex*, published in 1949 says, "One is not born a woman; one becomes one". The gender categories are rather social and cultural constructs. Gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience including those of literature, though one may or may not be consciously aware of these. One may look at almost any literary text from gender perspective, whether it is the Ramayana or the Mahabharata, a work of classical age, or modern age as such texts, after all deal with men and women and represent the characteristic features of their respective ages. Again, since all representations are made through language, the language of text reveals the attitude of the society towards gender issues. Moreover, in a technologically equipped global set up with herculean challenges and stresses of living, both men and women are bound to search for a new identity beyond what has been assigned to them by birth and there lies the question of negotiation which lends an extraordinary charm to life and living it in the truest sense of the term. The colonial encounter of various racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and coloured people over the ages has facilitated the formation of

hybrid trans-cultural multidimensional identity which has been the potential subject to be taken up by the postcolonial theorists and readers too.

Keeping all these facts in view, Bina Barua's time-tested *Jivanar Batat* may also be taken for gender study or women's study aiming at discovering female identity as perceived and defined by the author Bina Barua (Birinchi Kumar Barua) in the text. Bina Barua (Birinchi Kumar Barua) was writing at a time when feminism as a theory was not there, yet some people are always ahead of their time and our author was certainly one who was progressive in his thinking. Apart from that the adoption of a female identity while composing his best works firmly defines his attitude towards the female folk. In-fact, he perhaps wanted to raise and feel women's issues standing in their particular situation and from feminine point of view, a unique concept indeed. A re-reading of the readers' response to the gender aspects of the novel with special focus on female identity brings many interesting facts to surface. The treatment of feminine by the author is perceptible from the very beginning of the text itself. Though the novel is an "Androtext" (a text written by a man), yet a close reading of the text clearly indicates the far-sightedness and a positive attitude of the creator towards women-the important section of the society. The patriarchal system of the society and its illogical, unscientific and baseless notions and customs promulgated and popularised among the masses have been put into question. The character of Tagar is the focal point of attention and the rest of the characters get significance only when they are somehow or other related to Tagar's life and action. It is the incidents and coincidences, actions and reactions, dreams and realities, hopes and aspirations, ups and downs, ebb and flow in the life of Tagar which determine further development of the plot of the story. There is no denying the fact that the novelist as an omniscient narrator has an undercurrent of compassion towards the character of Tagar. The whole novel, in-fact, seems to be women-centric as from the very beginning, female characters are getting the utmost voice and maximum space whereas most of the male characters pale into insignificance before them. The novel seems to be quite well-conceived covering diverse aspects of human life for which it has till date been treated as the most representative novel in Assamese literature.

The story starts with the marriage of Aimoni-the daughter of Mouzadar. Tagar is a neighbour and has a friendly relation with Aimoni. On the occasion of the marriage, Tagar's possible marriage with Kamalakanta, the son of Mouzadar, Krishnadutta's friend is hinted by Numoli. After the wedding of Aimoni is over, Kamalakanta has to stay back for a few days. Tagar is entrusted with the task of looking after Kamalakanta which becomes a turning point from the point of view of the plot-construction of the novel. Tagar's magnetic personality brings Kamalakanta-one of the major male characters of the novel closer to her. That Tagar is a simple-hearted girl, free from any kind of inhibition or hesitation is proved in her free entrance to Kamalakanta's room for some work while he is alone. It also proves her self-confidence and establishes that she is not a patriarchal type-cast. But unfortunately, Kamalakanta is not a strong counterpart to Tagar. He comes out to be a feeble and unimpressive character. He is the most passive character in the novel as he was simply

perplexed to discover the golden ring which he had gifted to Tagar during his immature youth. The lack of determination of Kamalakanta to woo her to the last exposes the weakness of his personality and at the end of the story Kamalakanta remains a tool in the hand of fate. But Tagar is meant to be a strong and honest character-an epitome of beauty, love, affection, patience, perseverance, sacrifice and dedication who gives vitality and energy to the whole being of Assamese society as shown in the novel. Bina Barua has tried to retain the vivid, pulsating and dynamic aspects of Assamese life and culture particularly through the character of Tagar and the delineation of her proper identity in a beautiful poetic vein reminding us of the principal female characters and their search for identity in Jane Austen's masterpieces. In her unconscious mind, Tagar had always a soft-corner for her unfulfilled dream of being the wife of Kamalakanta which, of course, remains dormant in her but the same feeling is not found in Kamalakanta ever in the story. Even his wife Suprabha is just a foil to the character of Tagar.

Women have traditionally been found to be strong enough to tackle all the challenges of life with utmost patience and tact but it is the patriarchal social system which determines the discriminatory norms for them though patriarchy has no-doubt helped in redefining the concept of gender to some extent. Traces of patriarchal mindset can be found here and there in text mainly in the characters like Kamalakanta, the fiancée of Tagar who could not establish himself as a bold male figure, ready to face the sweet-bitter truths and turmoilic situations in life. His whimsical action in putting a ring in Tagar's finger proves his childish and totally irresponsible behaviour to which the latter reacts rather helplessly and remarks,

Apuni mur sarbanash kio korile?

It reflects Tagar's utmost dedication to tradition, the societal norms and moral values apart from her extreme honesty. She is not ready to compromise to her principle, even not for the sake of love or infatuation. When the same finger ring turns out to be the main cause for her defamation towards the end of the story, Kamalakanta does not come to her rescue or stands by her in the time of extreme crises and degradation. Even Tagar's father Bapuram Bora and her husband Dharani are portrayed as the perpetrators of patriarchal norms. None of them desires or dares to ask or fathom the innermost feelings and desires of Tagar which again proves the carelessness and indifference to women's wishes and decisions by male figures.

In-fact, Mahikanta comments with regard to his wife when she opposes his too much intimacy with Raibahadur.

parutenu tumalukak abuj nari jati bolene

But Mahikanta's wife is a relatively stronger character than her two male counterparts- her husband and her son Kamalakanta. She vehemently opposes the conspiracy of father-son in betraying Tagar by breaking her proposed marriage with Kamalakanta. She thus comments –

Nije chai chiti katha diya chualir biyaxhan akou larai bhangibalai jaba kihar jagarat?

But unfortunately, Kamalakanta could not exhibit his masculinity in this regard to marry Suprabha for meeting his selfish ends. It also shows the two male characters as

representations of opportunistic mentality of the middle classes. Again, patriarchal mentality is also discernible in remarks made by Mouzadarni like–

chualik bechikai parhai kinu labh? Grihasthalir kamkhini paripatikai sikilei hal.

Again she also says somewhere,

uliai dibalagia jiari chuali gharat thakile mak-bapekar chinta bhavanar ur nai....

jiman sunkale pari aie apadburak uliai diyahe bhal.

Tagar's father just speaks out the patriarchal view when he says –

chualir mat lai biya diar amar samajat atiyao chala nai.

The male ego of Kamalakanta becomes prominent when not being able to communicate to Raibahadur regarding his job-prospect because of the presence of Suprabha, Raibahadur's daughter, he sharply remarks,

Jimanei naganya nahauk narir agat nijar dinata prakash karibali purush sadai kunthita.

He becomes aware of his masculine superiority. Kamalakanta at the same time admonishes the so-called progress of women playing just a patriarchal role.

That women have to play the traditional gender roles imposed by patriarchy is shown in the comment –

Bidhata purushe Asomia tirutak sristir dinata bidhan kori diya chutal sara, pani ana, dhan banua kumar adinulaikeu chulidalmanu herpher haba nuare.

It also denotes the importance of Assamese women in home-making reaffirming their powerful position in the household.

But the author's realization of the sublimity of womanhood is also reflected sometimes in the comment like

Piche janiba tirutar bhagyae purushar bhagya.

A progressive attitude towards women can be found in Bina Barua when after the birth of a girl child to Tagar, Ahini-the mother-in-law of Tagar did not express any discrimination about sex. The perfect representation of patriarchal outlook is found in the typical mother-in-law-daughter-in-law relationship developed in the novel. Soon after Tagar steps into Dharani's house, Ahini adopts the patriarchal role of a conventional mother-in-law giving mental harassment to the new bride by her sharp remarks at every step. It is actually a means of retaining her powerful position as a typical mother-in-law in the society. It confirms what Kate Millet argues in her treatise, *Sexual Politics* that women as much as men are responsible in perpetuating the sex-role images particularly of women. Again the attitude of Ahini also gives rise to the 'Oedipus complex', a psycho-analytical concept. The mother's too much possessiveness of her son does not permit Ahini to accept and tolerate a third person in the form of a daughter-in-law in-between them lest the son's love is divided and gets more inclined towards his wife. This particular feeling is further intensified by the instigating remarks of Gosani, another patriarchal type-cast. The problem is that women like Ahini and Gosani have incorporated their assigned gendered roles without realising that they

are kept in dark and are subjugated in the process by age-old patriarchal and feudalistic system of society. The distressing matter is that instead of accepting Tagar as a daughter, Ahini rather takes her as a competitor. She wants to exert power over Tagar but ultimately in her attempt to transfer the activities of the household to Tagar, unconsciously she creates an alternative power-centre in the household. It is established by the remark,

uchar cuburiai agardare tamultu, panbira, cunkanar karane Ahinir uchar nechapi Tagararhe uchar chape..... Hat bazarar para itu situ bastu anibar hale Dharani e Tagarak he sudhe; Tagarar hatat he bastukan ani jatanai diyehi

In spite of all her concerted efforts to please Ahini by proving herself as an ideal daughter-in-law, she has failed to win Ahini's love and sympathy but the good news that Tagar is expecting has suddenly brought about radical change in her nature which raises her much in readers' eyes. The daughter-in-law who is so much repressed by her mother-in-law ultimately becomes instrumental in bringing back her lost status in the family. It is not that Ahini is without any love for Tagar. She, in fact, appears to be a pathetic figure at last as she becomes the victim of patriarchal social system which determines the specific gender roles for both men and women. The search for identity by Tagar is not just a silent protest against men folk but against women folk too as patriarchy takes all gender variants under its umbrella. But Tagar is of course another version of womanhood-the selfless, sacrificial and broad-minded. She, therefore, does never object to the constant misbehaviour of Ahini. On the contrary, she gladly accepts everything as a sort of practical education which will come of great help in realizing the greater truths of human life. A loving attitude of the author can thus be traced in the novel towards the position of Tagar as a daughter-in-law (*Buari*). In a sense, her uncompromising gestures and adhering to her principles raise her in our eyes above everyone else in the story. She has definitely developed a distinguishing personality of her own remaining within the limits set by tradition, heredity and culture which make her an adorable female figure who has successfully been able to maintain a balance between conventionality and modernity.

Tagar takes life challengingly. She has received a number of shocks in her life but never has she demonstrated her weakness and has rather striven to overcome all the hurdles. A deeper reading of *Jivanar Batat* brings out the boldness of her character. According to our reading, Tagar was never a woman who was bent on self-effacement. Her character cannot be called out and out a patriarchal type-cast. For example, Dharani's attitude towards her as a devoted wife may be apparent in the novel but at the time of returning from the police station while Dharani was speaking of service to the Nation and participation in the liberation struggle of the motherland in an exalted language, Tagar was accompanying the husband, being dumb-stuck. The insult to her being as she is a woman is the greatest shock of her life. Here we discover Tagar as an embodiment of bold feminine individuality. Again Tagar could ward off the evil intentions of Kudu and had the boldness of character to protect her chastity. Similarly the blame of theft against her daughter Kamali by her neighbour Mandalani had been strongly handled by Tagar and the punishment she had given her also showed the ability

of Tagar to tackle the unwanted situations. It also brings out the strength of Tagar's character. She is not feeble even after the death of her husband.

Tagar's practical approach to life comes out vividly in the remarks,
Mrita swamir karane bahi bahi binabalai Tagarar abasar nai..... pat prabartanar nirlajya chinta jat pradhan, kandi kati chakur pani tuka sai sthalat bilasitar namantar.

Her moral strength has been proved time and again. Thus being placed in critical situations, Tagar gets sufficient scope and space to project her inner self and build a unique identity of her own, an incarnation of moral strength, self-confidence and endurance at the most.

But the other female characters like Rangali, Mouzadarni, Ahini and Jetuki etc. are just the representatives of patriarchal mind-set and thus they do not contribute to the enhancement of the cause of women which is the main concern of gender studies. Again, some male characters like Mahahar, the brother-in-law of Tagar does not share the ill motives of his father—the typical patriarchal representation regarding the ornaments of Tagar. Thus the traditional gender roles dictating men as strong and repressive and women as feeble and submissive may not be applicable to all the cases in the novel. But patriarchal ideology is all pervasive and deep-rooted and feminists are trying their best to counter this Tagar has been a writer's favourite created quite lovingly and thoughtfully who tries to adopt a new feminine language that undermines and eliminates the patriarchal binary thinking that oppresses and silences women.

Tagar has the good potential of a future woman who is very much conscious of her womanhood. Though she is also a part of patriarchal social system, a modern reader may find out traces of a suitable gender-role of Tagar which was conditioned by the then social and cultural set-up.

Bina Barua while conceiving the novel has definitely thought of giving women the distinct voice and women-related issues the top most priority. The epigraphs engraved in the opening of each section of the novel bear the testimony to this fact. Again, the adoption of the pseudonym of Bina Barua—the name of a woman in the novel denotes an inherent support of the author for enhancing the cause of women.

Subjugation of the spirit and zeal of Tagar has been repeatedly done by the three prominent male figures like Kamalakanta, Tagar's father Bapuram Bora and husband Dharani. None of them has stood by her in arduous and embarrassing situations many a times. All the major male figures have ignored their responsibilities to females, particularly to Tagar, a kind of deprivation and injustice on their part, very undesirable for a balanced and just society. Again those who have spoken highly of her also reflect their stereotypical view about women as epitome of beauty, meekness, obedience, service-mindedness, patience and sacrifice. If Tagar would have been something else, dashing, revolting, egoistic, self-centered, unconventional and impolite, the reaction and response of the patriarchal society would have been rather different. She is depicted here as an image, desired and loved by male fraternity, an idealisation of the character of Tagar. Whenever the dignity of woman is

sacrificed for any other thing, it is not an acceptable and appreciable symptom for the healthy and positive social environment. Unfortunately most of the other female characters sacrifice their individual identity to act as the agents of stringent and dominating patriarchal system. Interestingly assessment of the character of Tagar, rude behaviour demonstrated to and unparliamentary words uttered for her in the novel by male figures like Police Sub-Inspector Madhav Mahanta imply the narrow outlook of patriarchy itself. Repressive forces are still at work for undermining the moral strength of Tagar but she will have to drive them out in order to survive and we believe she will do so. As Tagar is the pivotal character in the novel, her search for identity has been treated by foregrounding diverse roles played by her in different critical situations, bringing most of the other characters in close touch with her. But re-readings of the character of Tagar may unearth certain other aspects of her personality which may justify her struggle for making an individual identity and readers' understanding of the same in a better way. Tagar has played the assigned role perfectly and sincerely but she could not build herself as was perhaps dreamt of sometimes in some delicate moments of her life. Her character can still be developed as a more dynamic and versatile character to be able to leave her empowered imprint on the humanity in general and the feminine world and the creation of female identity in particular from postcolonial and feminist perspective.

The paper is just an attempt to find the platform for critiquing the issue of the search for female identity by adopting the gender-based tools in the novel, *Jivanar Batat*. Much scope is still there for further study for unveiling the unexplored areas of women's life..

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