

Introduction

History of modern short story writing in Assamese dates back to the *Jonaki* era, named after the second Assamese journal published in 1889. The fourth issue of the fourth volume in 1892 published Lakshminath Bezbaruah's short story "Xeuti," a path-breaking story, which was followed by a handful of other stories by him, including "Bhodori." At the outset of the 20th century, Bezbaruah-edited *Banhi* offered a platform for the evolution of this new genre through the efforts of a few other writers but Bezbaruah remained the most successful amongst them. The second phase in Assamese literature, known as the *Awahan* era, witnessed notable growth and enrichment of the short story form in the writings of Lakhminath Phukan, Dinanath Sarma, Umakanta Sarma, Krishna Bhuyan and a few others. Chandraprava Saikiani wrote a story, entitled "Daibagya Duhita" (The Fortune-teller's Daughter) in 1935 narrating the life of suffering of a child widow. An important aspect of the story is that Menaka, the child widow did not remain silent in the face of patriarchal injustice. She boldly reminds the society of its duty towards women as she speaks out in these words: "Women are also human beings, they can also read and write and work like men". Chandraprava Saikiani's writings insist that instead of maintaining a depoliticised stance of silence, women must resist all forms of injustice. Endorsement of this rebellious approach made her writings truly feminist. The third phase, named after the journal "*Ramdhenu*" co-incided with the post-independence, post-war period of 1950s, which initiated a new trend in story writing in terms of dynamism and multidimensionality. From "Xeuti" onwards, Assamese short story writing has been evolving through not only various phases of time but different stages of ideas and concepts as well. Besides other factors, it was the rise of female short story writing, which marked the beginning of a new chapter with the onset of the Ramdhenu period, and the pathbreakers in this new experiment were Kamalini Borbora, Sneha Devi, Nirupama Borgohain, Mamoni Roisom Goswami, Prabina Saikia, Anima Dutta and Nilima Sharma. Chandraprava Saikiani's story writing had already established the fact that female short story writing was in practice in the *Awahan* era itself. In the Ramdhenu era, however, the number of women writers increased in strength and their approaches developed in multiple dimensions with a strong focus on women's lives and women's voices protesting against gender discrimination. The Ramdhenu period ended in the early 1970s. The last part of the 20th century may rightly be called the post-Ramdhenu period, but at the same time, it has to be noted that with the inception of the Assam

agitation in 1980s, the literary scenario also entered into a new phase of unprecedented changes particularly in the authors' selection of material and representation of points of views. Aparna Mahanta in her seminal work *Journey of Assamese Women: 1836-1937* mentions that the women who began writing in Assam had very "weak and unformed voices" which, however, were "their own" and the Post Independence generation of women writers are "the beneficiaries of their foremother's struggles" (Mahanta 2008: 189). Indeed the genre of short stories in Assamese by women writers has travelled a long way to reach a privileged position where women have treaded into unknown/lesser known terrains with newer and experimental subject matters and plots along with a fresh perspective on regular and recurring themes.

The socio-political environment in Assam underwent sea-changes in 1980s with increasing political heat and turmoil generated by the students-led movement for the deportation of foreigners, known in the contemporary history as the struggle for survival of the Assamese. In the field of literature in Assamese, this period is not named after any literary magazine or journal, but like the previous epochs in literary history, the period of 1980s and thereafter too witnessed the role of magazines and journals in breaking new grounds in the field of creative writing by offering a solid platform to a new generation of writers for making experiments with new subjects and styles. In this context, mention may be made of the journals like literary journals like, *Prakash*, *Goriyoshi*, *Xatxori*, *Prantik* and a host of special festival issues published by the newspapers. This period is usually referred to as the contemporary period in the history of Assamese literature. Amongst the various distinguishing features of the new phase of contemporary literary praxis, notable aspects of the short story output of this period of the century may be specified as: authorial departure from the sentimental excess and subjective involvement in the chosen material, engagement with the political, experiments with challenging narrative forms giving up traditional accessories of short story like plot and characters, and a major section of writers endorsing the genre of short story as a space which accommodates multiple and competing world-views rather than projecting a singular authorial perspective meant for the intended readers. The ubiquitous nature of the political heat and dust, however, could not invest every writer with a mature vision for which many writings exhibited only political immaturity rooted in prejudiced ideological underpinnings. Ananda Barmudoi, a well-known critic, enlisting some of the signs of unconventionality in the short story writings of this period says that the new generation of writers exhibited a new trend through their engagement in a mode of narrative. Contemporary short story narrative, according to him, is marked by rejection of cause-and-effect thematic convention, absence of a central thematic

focus and any ideological moorings, use of non-standard modes of expression and fragments of events, unknowing narratorial voices and mixture of varied genres investing the form of the story with the attributes of drama and poetry. The post-Ramdhenu Assamese short story writing is not an extension of the previous tradition and trend in this genre. This is an observation by the eminent poet, critic and short story writer Harekrishna Deka. In an article "Trends and Tendencies in the Post-Ramdhenu Assamese short story writing" published in a book titled "*Axomiya Chuti Galpa: Oitjya aru Bibartan*", he points out that the primary focus in the short story writings of the Ramdhenu period was the nature of reality in the modern age. But the post-Ramdhenu period, Deka says, inaugurates a new phase in the history of Assamese short story writing since the new-age writers exhibit an unprecedented tendency in shifting their focus to the 'form' of the story as narrative. While the earlier generation of writers dealt with life and society from a modernist perspective, the post-Ramdhenu period writers make conscious attempt to acknowledge the 'storyness of the story'. Dr. Ananda Bormudoi maintains that the early 21st century Assamese short story writing exhibits a double tendency which is somewhat contradictory: on the one hand, the new age writers manifest a desire to extend the glorious tradition of the Ramdhenu and Awahan era, and on the other, there is a conscious effort to resist the impact of the previous tradition. This has resulted in the evolving of a creative praxis that entails series of experiments in the art of narration. Absence of a central theme or focus and a non-committal authorial stance invest contemporary short story writing with signs of modernity, which were hardly seen before. Assamese short story, despite showing some signs of post-modernism here and there, still subscribes to the logic of reason and to a basic system of human values; it is decidedly modern in orientation and approach. Pradip Acharjya ascribes this trait of Assamese short story writing to the moderately undisturbed socio-political environment in this part of the world where devastating occurrences like the World Wars have not fortunately taken place to demolish the ground of belief leading to shocking disillusionment with the age-old value system. Feelings of hopelessness and exhaustion are unquestionably there and yet belief in humanity still persists with the result that postmodern expressions and experiments remain academic and over-imposed in our literary experiments.

The rise of women's writings in the last two decades of the 20th century is undoubtedly an outstanding highlight of the contemporary literary environment not only in terms of numbers but mainly in the sense that they wrestle with the emerging reality with a bold,

unconventional and mature approach making it the most popular field for creative experiments. If we trace the history of women's writings in Assam, we get to see that it had the beginning in the time of Sankardeva itself, although it neither received any public recognition nor were recorded in the written form. Dr Mamoni Roisom Goswami points out in the Preface to a collection of short biographical sketches written by women that women's devotional writings were as old as those by Sri Sankardeva. According to her, a woman named Aai Padmapriya had written devotional poems in the 15th century Assam but her writings did not find a place in public archives resulting in the complete erasure of this historical truth from public memory. Now as we talk about women's writings, it is considered as a completely new 20th century literary phenomenon although a substantial part of the much older oral folk tradition is attributed to the rural womenfolk. This obviously is a serious issue of manipulative gender politics, aiming at derecognizing the history of a female literary tradition. Elaine Showalter documents in her book *A Literature of Their Own* how the male literary tradition is upheld as the canon in the self-aggrandizing system of patriarchy with a dismissive approach to the tradition of female writings. This oppressive tendency of dehistoricising the female literary tradition calls for a concerted move to retrieve and revisit the forgotten history by none other than the fraternity of women authors. On the other hand, when such a move takes place, then dissenting voices are raised through sceptical questions as if the project of studying women writings does not serve any meaningful purpose at all! Roland Barthes' 'Death of the author' dictum is frequently alluded to in order to reject any attempt at classifying and investigating discursive practices with references to the class, caste, religion, place of living, language, nationality and gender of the writers. The role of the author, however, is historically determined, as argued by Michel Foucault in contradiction to the much-hyped theory of authorial death. A woman author too performs a historically manipulated role since her situatedness as a woman allows her to enter into the textual space in a way, which may not be possible for those situated beyond that gender specification. Being entrenched in the historical condition of gender subordination, the woman authors represent cultural-political forces underlying the historical contexts including the context of patriarchy through their writings. While questioning and critiquing the ideological underpinnings, they participate in the historical-political transaction between the texts and contexts. Women's writing is a testimony of the negotiation between their self and the world, the text and the context and more importantly a space to assert their claim to female agency, the position of subjecthood denied to them by the dominant voice of patriarchy. It is also a proof of a more engaged participation in the civil/political space of the complex workings of 'nation', 'statehood', 'citizenship'.

Whether they are conscious feminists or not, they are aware of the fractures of a society where relations are defeated and twisted. They see suppressed pains and wrongs clearly, sometimes accompanied by anger and more often by resignation.

Do women experience, perceive and relate differently than men to the world they live in? Jasbir Jain, an eminent critic of recent times, expressing her viewpoints in this regard, argues that differences are not so much oppositional as rooted in the individual being of a woman. There is no such thing as woman's behaviour, because every woman reacts differently to the varied range of experiences. Emphasising the need to read women writing beyond the stereotypes, Jasbir Jain points out that there is a tendency to deny the presence of individual distinctiveness in the writing practices of women. She writes:

"When women write about socio-political issues they fall into universal categories and hence their individual approach is submerged, when they write about women's experiences it is dismissed as trivial, domestic, confessional, romantic or excessively bold" (Jain: 1659).

Women writers very logically reject their categorizations. Mahasweta Devi, Shashi Deshpande and many other prominent writers would like to call themselves only writers without any gender specifications. In an interview with Jasbir Jain, Shashi Deshpande insists that she is a writer who happens to be a woman and not the other way around (Jain:1655). According to her, categorization creates fresh stereotypes and limits the reading frame. Following the same line of thinking, Jasbir Jain takes on the critical prejudice against women writing by pointing out that when women write about socio-political issues they fall into universal categories where their individual approach is submerged. On the other hand, when women writers write about women's experiences, it is dismissed as romantic, ordinary and trivial. In our study, we will see how women react to the various socio-political issues like terrorism, nationalism, transnationalism, globalism, ecological degradation, etc. Their views cannot be clubbed together as a singular female point of view as their approaches, instead of demonstrating any singularity of purposes, vary from person to person. How can we justify the logic of woman having a singular point of view when we get to see that Mousumi Kandali, Arupa Patangia Kalita and Purabi Bormudoi deal in their stories with the subject of terrorism from varied perspectives in their uniquely distinctive styles. We cannot locate any common ground between Purabi Bormudoi and Rashmirekha Bora when they explore the subject of man-and-nature conflict through their short stories. Similarly, when a host of female writers

address the subject of motherhood, their approaches, far from striking any common chord, become as divergent as ranging from glorification of the ideal of motherhood to a critical disapproval of the role of self-sacrificing motherhood. These stories stand as excellent examples of what Helene Cixous meant by her term 'écriture féminine', which she used to describe women's writings. Rejecting the notion of a single signifier being connected to a single signified, 'écriture féminine' celebrates the 'lack' associated with a woman's body, her marginalised position in every level of any socio-cultural interaction, and at the same time celebrates plurality which holds the essence of 'feminine writing' as opposed to male writing. Cixous through her writings establish that women's unconscious is totally different from men's (also depicted in their writings) and that it is their psychosexual specificity that will empower women to create new female discourses overthrowing set masculinist ideologies (in Jones 1984: 251). And it is these discourses generated through women's writings in various genres which bind them together.

Breaking new grounds in the thematic dimension of the short story genre, the new generation of Assamese women writers have selected unconventional material, which were never treated before as appropriate subjects for fictional literature in the Assamese literary scenario. Mousumi Kandali deals with homosexuality in a story titled "Tritiatvar Galpa" (The Story of the Third Space), although the focus of the story is not homosexuality but the prospect of creating a hybrid third ground beyond the bi-polarities of gender. Prarthana Saikia, a young writer, goes to the extent of dealing with incest in her story "Krishna Gahbar" (The Black Hole). Prarthana Saikia documents her ability to treat even contemporary critical theories as subjects of short story literature. Can we completely do away with the one-dimensional point of view and can multi-dimensional approach be complete without the one dimensionality of our mundane existence? Are these critical phrases and concepts mere critical apparatus or pretexts to cover up the one-dimensional tedium of everyday life? The passive onlooker of Prarthana's story "Ekamatrik" (The One Dimensional) is an image of the all-pervading singular position, while the other people frequenting the shop, a particular location, from different directions with different purposes stand for multidimensionality at the surface level. The storywriter attempts to read everyday life in the light of contemporary critical thinking and unravels the limitations in the approach. Critiquing the tendency of applying theoretical apparatus in story writing, Harekrishna Deka too points out that it results in the loss of the story's content in the mess of technique as in most cases of experiments, the form is not incorporated into the content of the story. Women writers' voice raised through the medium of short story, however, offer an

interesting area of study as it signals a path-breaking departure from the 20th century conventions in terms of choice of subject matter, points of view and narrative techniques. The textual representations of such issues and concerns as female subjectivity, gender disparity, women and nature, terrorism, women and language, reconstructing and appropriating folktales and myths from women's points of view certainly demand critical enquiry. Women's short story writing not only maps the cultural geography of the society, it also offers a site for registering women's voice of resistance and for performing their agency as subjects challenging the object-position imposed on them in the male discursive practices.

Although it is a matter, of common acknowledgement that Assamese short story writing is not lacking in innovative experiments by the writers, critical praxis in this field is quite inadequate and this is more so in case of female writing. Elaine Showalter writes in *A Literature of Their Own* that there was a female literary tradition but it did not get the critical historiographers' attention. If we relate it to the Indian context, then the situation does not seem to be different at all. The anthology of Indian writing during the post- independence period edited by Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West allows little space to vernacular literature, let alone women writing. Amit Choudhury too, despite his claim to correct the gap, in his anthology of Indian writing included vernacular literature but women writing has still remained neglected in his work. Susie Tharu and K Lalita, who edited *Women Writing in India, Volume 1 and 2*, write in the *Preface* to the book say: "We looked more specifically for pieces that illuminated women's responses to historical developments and ones that gave insight into the dimensions of self-fashioning and the politics of everyday life as they affected women. We paid special attention to writers we thought had been underestimated or whose work ought to be far better known"(Tharu and Lalita: xxiv) This anthology is a compilation of translated pieces written by women writers belonging to different languages of India, But the editors seem to have fallen short of translating into reality their objective of paying attention to writings which had been 'underestimated' and 'ought to be far better known' in view of the fact that writings in languages like Assamese are conspicuously absent in this anthology. In a move to justify their exclusion of Assamese female writing, they have said: "Very regretfully we had to exclude Assamese literature, which has a long and distinguished tradition of women writers"(Tharu and Lalita: xxii). It gives an indication as to the extent of double neglect regional women literature has been experiencing in the national context for being peripheral and female. This study does not profess any far-fetched claim to put the things in correct perspective and yet it makes a humble effort to consolidate a base for critical assessment of

Assamese writing in English so that the ‘distinguished tradition’ of our women writers, to use Susie Tharu and K Lalita’s phrase, gets a platform for wider interaction and transaction in the national context.

One of the objectives of this study of Assamese women writing is to sensitize the students of English literature with the “literature of their own”. The contemporary revamping of English syllabus in the colleges and universities follows the postcolonial guideline that the marginal writers should be accorded the importance they deserve. Indian literature, to break out of the cell of Indian writing in English and Hindi, must include the multiple voices represented by the regional languages. As the students of English literature are expected to come out of the exclusive zone of canonical English writings, they are to acquaint themselves with the regional writings. This will give them an opportunity to see how texts bear complex and subversive relationships to the contexts and why each text has to be situated and examined in a particularly historical situation instead of reading them in isolation.

In order to assess the contemporary scenario of Assamese short story writing with reference to the women writers’ achievement, prospects and limitations in this field, we will confine ourselves to their writings in the last fifteen years. Considering the constraints in terms of time and space, it is not possible to incorporate all the writings produced in this period in our analysis and despite that our study makes efforts to take account of as many writers as possible. Monthly journals, magazines, festival issues, individual writers’ compilation of short stories and *Bacharar Galpa* series published by *Aak Baak* have been used as primary sources while for secondary sources we have studied select critical writings both in Assamese and English. The study is aimed at identifying and exploring trends and tendencies that have been emerging in our short story writing by female authors and to see whether they have succeeded in giving a new character to this genre by exploiting this platform as a medium of self-discovery and protest and also for registering varied approaches to the world around. The work consists of three chapters where we address three major areas concerning women’s writing: the ways women respond to the issues of female identity, the world in socio-political turmoil and the subject of terrorism. We have included here snapshots of viewpoints of women short story writers on some of the issues and questions pertaining to the contemporary scenario in the field of short story writing in Assamese. This, we hope, will enlighten us about the writerly perspective that emerges out of their situatedness the understanding of which can shed light on our ideas about the text-context transaction that permeate their writings. A few excerpts in

translation are also included at the end in order to give the interested readers a glimpse of the praxis in the field of women's short story writing in Assamese.

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