

### Beyond the Allegories of Gender Subordination

“Not all literature written by women is feminist, or even about women. Neither is the scope of women’s writing restricted to allegories of gender oppression.” (Susie Tharu and K Lalita: *Women Writing in India*; Volume 1; page 35).

Women’s writing is not always polemical. The emergence of a new socio-political environment in the last two decades of the twentieth century and the threats and anxieties associated with the changed back-drop, led to the expression of concern for gender-neutral issues and problems on the part of the women writers with the resultant displacement of gender-specific themes. The expansion of horizon in the selection of material is viewed by many as the beginning of a new phase called post-feminism in the field of women’s writing. This, however, should not create an air of complacency regarding the resolution of women’s question, because the struggle for equality in all spheres of women’s life still has a long way to go, especially in a state like Assam where successful resolution of one problem is followed by the rise of many more problems of complicated nature such as witch-hunting and girl child-trafficking. This chapter is devoted to a brief study of the short story writing by our women authors who have widened the scope of their writing to focus on issues and concerns which are not necessarily women-centric but are invested with larger socio-political ramifications for the society in question. Their writings bear at least two major significances: first, women can think and write on gender-neutral issues and their writing is not invariably allegories of gender discrimination; second, women writing on the glaring issues and problems of universal as well as immediate application demonstrate that women might have a different perspective from that of men on those issues and problems. Being an individual, in fact, every woman can think differently and approaches a situation in her individual capacities rather than as a representative of her gender. The following section of this chapter makes an attempt to throw light on these interesting dimensions of Assamese short story writing by women authors.

### **Addressing the Problematics of Nationalism: Anuradha Sarma Pujari.**

An allegation frequently levelled against the historiographers of Indian nationalism is that the role of women in the rise of nationalism has been marginalized in the pages of Indian history. This argument, however, can be placed and read from a different perspective as well. Indian women can see beyond the limits of political nationalism as is demonstrated by the writings of women authors in the last century. The last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the rise of zingistic sentiments in the country and along with it parallel developments in the form of identity politics and separatist movements have been making the postcolonial Indian nationalism a hotbed for contesting many conventional views about nation-formation. If on the one hand, issues of political borders and cultural distinctions are prioritised, on the other side there is a serious move to think beyond these markers of national identity. The contending narratives of nation-formation and its new configurations find a space for representation through the medium of short story writing. A senior writer-journalist Anuradha Sarma Pujari deals in a number of her stories with this issue of national identity from a critical rather than celebratory standpoint exposing the loopholes in the narratives of nation formation in the Indian context. Her story *No Man's Land* centers around a volatile political situation involving India and its neighbouring country Bangladesh. A goodwill football match is organized between the border security forces of India and Bangladesh to promote an environment of friendly relationship between the two countries. But how far these sort of diplomatic ventures undertaken at the administrative level create conducive atmosphere for peaceful bilateral ties is a matter to be investigated seriously. As the narrative of the story unravels, as soon as the match comes to an end, the feeling of distrust and insecurity takes the centerstage in Dawki, the area near the border of India in Meghalaya. The narrator of the story, watching the match in mode of high enthusiasm like many other spectators coming from both sides of the border, ruminates:

Truly, India and Bangladesh have become one country in the football field at Dawki. It seems as if we are watching a world cup football match! Intense feeling of excitement has brightened up the whole playground. About two hundred men from Bangladesh have arrived here to lend support to their team. How strange! It was Riaz in the left-in position! I could not help shouting 'Riaz', 'Riaz', as soon as I saw Riaz kicking off the ball. Am I not guilty of anti-national act? But it is a game, a good-will game, a game that wipes out all the impurities of the mind. In fact, in such matches, the Indian audience should show solidarity towards the Bangla players and the Bangla audience

should do the same to the Indian players. My conscience is clear. For a moment, I have become a bird, a tree, a river, a fountainhead of pleasure in this no man's land.

But the narrator's positive perceptions are soon followed by disillusionment as after a few days she comes to know that Lily, a local fish seller, has been shot at by none other than Riaz, the Bangladeshi army personnel who, on an earlier occasion, spoke before the narrator as to how the no man's land teaches them to think and act deeply. Lily was shot at on the pretext that she was spotted with a Bangladeshi national whom she was giving shelter and was escorting the man to the other side of the border. The unexpected turn in the situation that has made fun of the official policy of establishing amiable diplomatic ties, compels the narrator to rethink and revise her earlier views:

Poor Lily! Only she could understand, without being taught by anyone, the meaning of the no man's land, the zone of zero.

Borders create divisions, but common people do not subscribe to the vocabulary of political nationalism as shown through the character of Lily who dares to defy the authority for the sake of intimate human ties. Anuradha Sarma Pujari voices her concern about the rise of sectarian thinking in the name of nation building in her story "Ximar Ipare" (Beyond the Border). The story documents that ill feelings between Pakistan and India thrive on some stereotypically misconceived views and the urgent need of the time is to think beyond these political myths. Her story titled, "Jet-Setor Xomoyot" (During Jet-Set) describes how the narrator as an Indian passenger boarding a flight to America reacts sternly to a European co-passenger's apparently negative comments on India since the former views the whole situation purely in terms of East-West Divide. In a moment of angry outburst, she says to Mark, the man from the West:

You are looking at India only through your negative outlook, you have no idea about this country's problems of over population. Population, lack of health and sanitation are related to India's poverty. Even amongst your people, we get to see lack of cleanliness. You do not know how climate plays an important role in our way of life. You people from the cold countries are dirtier than those in the hot regions.

The narrator, however, gets to know the other side of the picture and feels sorry for being so far blinded by her prejudiced estimate of Mark who is genuinely affectionate and caring towards his Indian stepdaughter born to his European wife Clara and her estranged

Indian husband. Clara, making sincere efforts to rise above the petty thoughts that distinguish people of the world in the name of race and culture, says before the narrator about the need to reach the condition of jet-set, the meaning of which she explains in these words:

The more you go higher and higher, the less you will come under the pull of gravitation. That was why the sages in the ancient times had chosen high altitude locations for meditation. Now we are flying thousand miles above the ground level. Leaving behind the earth below, we are now floating in the clouds amidst bluish infinity. We have detached ourselves from all the illusory ties with the plants and trees, hills and mountains, rivers and seas, birds and beasts and our loving ones. We are roaming around here amidst the countless stars in a zone of purity, this nebulous space that we cannot reach out from the ground below.

Clara's description of the 'Jet-set' as the neutral space where all divisive thoughts disappear introduces a strong case for reconsidering and redefining the concepts of nation and nationhood in the postcolonial world. The north-east India, viewed always by the 'mainland' India as the conflict zone, is caught in a dilemma: it is expected to submit on the one hand to the Indian nationhood unconditionally and on the other, the growth of secessionist movements, questioning the very ethos of Indian nationhood, is suspected as the reflection of general sentiment of the common people for which they are made to suffer in the hands of the counter-insurgency forces. Between the two extremes, Anuradha Sarma Pujari's stories engage in a search for the middle-ground where people can shed off the burden of nationalism and meet and form ties only as human beings.

### **Critiquing the Culture of Globalism: Arupa Patangia Kalita**

Arupa Patangia Kalita, discussed in the previous chapter of this study in the context of issues related to gender, has an all-encompassing awareness of a socially conscious serious writer to have focussed on a number of diverse issues tormenting the present time. The culture of globalism and commercialism eroding the values of humanity, which is particularly damaging for the moral health of the young generation, receives critical treatment in a number of stories written by Arupa. One of these stories, titled *Putagni* presents through a series of snap-shots how age-old intimate family ties are dying down mainly on account of the dehumanizing culture of consumerism. A sophisticated mobile set, a trendy T-shirt, a motor bike or a bundle

of notes are much more valuable than their parents for the young generation of present time. But Arupa, far from being judgemental on the behaviour of the young generation, diagnoses the problem as too deeply rooted in the growing consumerist global environment. Her stories, however, assert the power of human beings to rise above the deepening crisis. The paradox at the heart of globalism is that it breaks down the walls and makes the world small but it creates unbridgeable gaps amongst individuals even within the families, let alone the whole world. In the story *Morion Austin* and *Hira Baruah*, Hira Baruah is now a lonely old woman since her son has settled abroad. She keeps a dog as her only companion at home. The same Hira Baruah earlier could not understand the meaning of a story told by her uncle about a lonely European woman named Morion Austin who kept a dog and behaved with the animal as if it was a human being. Hira Baruah, however, finally finds a society of her own because she knows how to come out from the self-enclosed cell of loneliness by forming a wider society with love and concern for those who might not share blood-ties with her but they are the people who fill in her small world with genuine care and affection. Arupa Patangia deals with issues like breakdown of family, conflict of generations and old age loneliness without subscribing to the language and mode of emotional excess. While she identifies the contemporary trend of globalism and consumerism as the root of various socio-cultural maladies, she also wants to reinforce the belief through the narratives of her stories that instead of submitting helplessly to the pressure of these forces, individuals must strive for a strategy of survival by holding on firmly to the values of humanity. In a story titled "Mayamriga" (The Golden Deer: a Delusion), the alarming demoralisation in the present generation of youngsters is attributed to the mindless commercialisation of the education system where one can buy education with money. The young boy of the story who threatens to commit suicide if his parents do not send him to China to study medical science is only a representative case of thousand similar situations in which middle class parents have to bear the brunt as their wards are preyed upon by the money making business houses in the name of education in a foreign land.

### **A Search for the Third Space beyond the Polarities: Mousumi Kandali**

It is not merely gender, but other cultural markers of identity such as religion, caste, communities as well which are questioned in Mousumi's stories for their denial of the third space in the politics of identity construction. The third space that accommodates multiplicities is always put at stake by the illusory search for pure and single identity, giving rise to the hate-mongering politics of conflict and confrontation. Mousumi's story 'Brahamadaitvya



Brahamajal' (The Great Demon and the Sacred Water) makes statements, which are highly critical of the agency of pure identity:

"At the crossroads of history and passages of time, everything is synthetic. Even blood. Has anything remained to be called pure and original? Synthesis is the third condition of love and co-existence in this world of love. The third truth."

The story unfolds an imaginary dialogic interaction between the muted voice of submission and the aggressive voice of dominance in a move to pave the way for the third truth of mingling and mixing of pluralities. The third space offers a liberating force that does not leave one with the regrets of self-surrender and the madness of dominance, embodied in two antithetical archetypal figures mentioned in the narrative – the hills and the river. Both the hills and the river water, invested with politically suggestive meaning, denote the process of civilization. But water which has been carrying the seeds of colonization in the name of civilization binds the soul of the hills with stereotypical myths. Here begins the history of conflict and confrontation between the two entities, unleashing the embittered politics of exclusion and otherness. People and culture belonging to the hills are viewed as peripheral in the march of history towards progress. The voice of resistance of the narrator in the story speaks through the voice of the hills as the latter asserts that we ought to inhabit the plural selves, which accommodate multiplicities and contraries.

Drawing upon the theory of Physics formulated by Maxwell, Mousumi's story '*Maxwell's Devil*' exploits the scientific theory of Maxwell to construct the image of a devil who keeps on wielding his rod to prevent the atoms and molecules acting and reacting on each other. Maxwell's Devil is the prototype of all stereotypical concepts like purity and originality in the contexts of culture, race, ethnicity, etc. As an advocate of all forms of fundamentalism or essentialism, Maxwell's devil desperately tries to keep the process of mixing of atoms and molecules at bay. The narrator of the story observes a parallel move in the socio-political context, as she identifies the advocates of cultural fundamentalism in the society with the imaginary devil in Maxwell who deny the truth of pluralities, i.e., the third space of being and becoming which, in Mousumi's observation, offers the much-needed political solution to all sorts of conflict and confrontation that take place in the name of absolute differences and purity. Synthesis rather than segregation is the road to be chosen by all the cultures of the world if they are to survive in the global environment. The story "Ra Banhor Chikmikoni" (Ra: The Glittering Bamboo) addressing the question of bridging the gap between the local and the global, presents a situation where the magic of primitive and pristine beauty entrenched in a

song composed by a tribal woman is under the threat of extinction after its forced migration into the public sphere, followed by its packaging and marketing. The young protagonist of the story, however, is aware of the promise offered by the third route of cultural assimilation lying ahead:

There could be another route between the right and the left ones. He should step forward carefully along that route so that Momoko's song does not get lost in the wilderness.

The folk-songs belonging to our ancestors cannot deny or escape the reality of commodification in the face of changes brought in by globalization and the only way out is the third space of mingling which the young generation of the story tries to tread on. The young men will preserve Momoko's beautiful song and the future of folk culture with their sensitivity to the uniqueness of the cultural products. They are the ones to re-fashion the indigenous cultural artifacts in response to the need in the global world. This is the way of synthesis that accommodates both the local and the global. An isolated space where age-old cultural tradition will remain untouched by the contemporary forces of globalism is only a cultural utopia. The prospect of synthesis offered by the third space is not only inevitable but desirable at the same time, Mousumi notes. The title of the collection of Mousumi's stories, 'In the aftermath of Lambada' and the story of the same name have special significance from this standpoint as they draw the attention of the readers to the Brazilian dance form 'Lambada' which became internationally popular in 1980s. The emergence of a new face of an old dance form is richly suggestive of the blending of tradition with contemporary trend in the globalised world. This third space in the cultural realm is an essential condition for the survival of the traditional cultural forms in the globally changing socio-political climate.

Mousumi's stories offer a terrain of contestation of some of the contemporary theories of art and literature, which are aimed at commodifying the individual at the cost of basic human values. This critical endeavor in her fictional works, however, ironically creates the impression that her stories are overtly preoccupied with difficult and abstract theories rather than dealing with the commonplace. But this seems to be a flawed estimate of her stories. That Mousumi has the knack of exploiting the theories against themselves rather than glorifying the contemporary trend of theorizing and indulgence in abstraction, is documented by her stories like 'The Shoes Must Go on'. There is a pun implicated in the word 'shoes', which otherwise might have been 'shows' with a slight slippage in spelling. The narrator tells us about a barber who mends shoes of other people but whose own pair of shoes always remains shabby and

ragged. This descriptive snapshot is immediately followed by the narrator's reflective comment on the picture of a pair of shoes in a canvass drawn by an artist. She wonders as to how the pair of shoes could really become a 'show' if seen from different perspectives. The narrator imagines the ways in which the picture of a pair of shoes would have drawn varied responses from different quarters like Derrida, Heidegger or Schopenhauer with their indulgence in playing the unending game of meaning-making. They would have seen the shoes as a signifier for postmodern truth but their preoccupation with art-truth could only throw the stark reality of day-to-day living into the background. A worn-out, ragged shoe lying in a pool of blood after a terrible blast might belong to the poor barber whose life is so insecure and uncertain in the perilous conditions of socio-political life. The story asks a serious question – can the bitter truths of everyday life be ignored in the name of art-truth? Should we celebrate the so-called 'simulacra' as the reality that supplants the commonplace reality in the postmodern world? Here the readers are reminded of another story of Mousumi, titled "Xeī Sokutu" (The Gaze). 'The Gaze', critiquing the postmodern theory of simulacra and hyper reality, exposes the domineering, imposing approach of the media world as a ridiculous extension of the 'male gaze', a term used in the field of feminist thinking to denounce the patriarchal practices covertly designed for female subjugation. The story shows that the media-constructed reality is nothing but a voyeurism that takes unholy interest in the life of struggle and suffering of the common people with the single purpose of commodifying human lives for monetary profit and entertainment. Media-constructed reality cannot erase the truth and complexity of the day-to-day reality and the story, unveiling the former only as a pale and reductive shadow of the latter, makes an appeal to its conscientious readers to see reality not in the terms formulated by the intervening agency of the media, but in its own uncorrupted terms.

An interesting outcome of the act of reading as experienced by the readers of Mousumi's stories is that while on the one hand they can develop their taste and awareness of the contemporary critical theories and concepts through the very act of reading, at the same time they can also discover, during that very process of active appropriation of critical knowledge, the gaps and raptures in those theories and ideas. Readers feel enriched to be engaged in a critical endeavor of questioning and dismissing these critical exercises. The unconventional underlying strategy at work in her narratives thus carries the seeds of counter-narratives as well. The story of '*Ravana1020@ Fantasy dot com*' is illustrative of the presence of narrative and counter-narrative in Mousumi's stories. The mystical figure of ten-faced Ravana with his twenty hands is said to have a modern implication as it is suggestive of



impure, fluctuating, fragmented and multiple subjectivities of an individual of our own time. But the theory of multiple selves instead of being taken in its face value, is shown as fraught with irony and contradictions as the narrator points out in the concluding section of the story that one can save himself or herself only with his two real hands, not with the one score of hands, the image of the virtual reality to which one would like to escape but cannot. Thus, the texts of Mousumi's stories contain an underlying subtext intended to criticize the narrative foregrounding of critical vocabulary pertaining to contemporary theories

The celebrated Afro-American writer Toni Morrison says: "The best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time." Mousumi's stories fulfil these two conditions of good writing – aesthetic experimentation and political thinking. Although there is no such thing as apolitical literature, the degree of the political engagement varies from text to text, writer to writer, sometimes very pronounced and conscious, sometimes implicit and guarded. Mousumi belongs to the first category in her conscious engagement with the political. Her story "Dantiparor Turturoni" (The Periphery Budge) is a fictional foregrounding of the political subject of the subaltern voice. Here, the voice of collectivity dismisses the European travellers' narratives about the East as prejudiced and flawed while replacing the grand narratives with their own little narratives. In fact, writing can be a strong platform of protest, as is shown in the story "Andhika Parba" (The Era of Darkness). The narrator in this story hopes that the mythical era of darkness when woman was subjugated in the name of gender and caste will end through woman writing about herself. Identity politics, cultural hegemony and conflict, subaltern resistance, multiculturalism, the local vs. the global, reality and hyper reality – these are some of the contemporary issues and concerns the presence of which always create a platform for dialogic interaction in Mousumi's stories. Frequent allusions to literary theories and intellectual concepts, revisiting the mythical, etc. are only some of the major techniques in her stories by means of which the known world is defamiliarized and counter narratives are constructed with a definite political intent, i.e. to engage the readers in the search for a plausible solution in the midst of the chaos and conflict between apparently antagonistic forces.

## **The Time is out of joint: Manorama Das Medhi**

The late 1990s added a murky chapter to the political history of Assam as the conflict-infested state was passing through a peculiar crisis called 'secret killings', seen by many as a desperate state policy of curbing terrorism by wiping out the family members of the dreaded terrorist outfits. Manorama Das Medhi, a storywriter of much repute, has written a number of stories on a variety of issues. This section intends to make a special mention of her story "Hoituba Tahanio" (May be an Ancient Legacy) which deals with this controversial subject of secret killing in a way that speaks of her maturity and ingenuity. In this story, the issue of secret killing is presented, not as a time-specific recent occurrence but as an indispensable fall-out of the power play between the ruler and the ruled. The narrative introduces the story of an ancient king who instructed the chief of the soldiers to create a state of terror in his country by resorting to a secret strategy of random killing of the common people. Amongst the victims' families, there was a boy who had to lose his father and brother in front of his own eyes. The boy could not forget the face of his father's killers, though he dared not expose his identity in public. When he learnt reading and writing as wished by his late father and became a grown-up man, he felt a compulsive desire to give an outlet to the traumatic experiences of his childhood through the medium of poetry. He penned down poems on the theme of betrayal of the poor and helpless by the rich and the powerful, gained popularity and was made the court poet. But the story of the young poet does not end there. The king wanted a happy conclusion for the poems and the poet subscribed to his wishes. Erotic element had to be incorporated as per the wishes of the king and in this way the poems had lost their original intent and character. What he had intended to be condemned as evil was subsequently deified and the poet earned so much glory through his poetry that people started to deify the poet himself after his death!

This story can be read as a text that shows how writing acts as an instrument for playing with power. All discursive practices are sites of conflict between the contending forces and in this game of power, the dominant side always suppresses the voices of the weak by manipulating meanings into the discourses in a way that serves its own interest. Manorama Das Medhi's story epitomizes the way discourses are constructed and reconstructed to serve the interest of the dominant forces of the society. It questions the very effectiveness of literary practices in addressing the issues of the underprivileged sections of the society and reminds us of the oft-quoted statement that the subalterns cannot speak. When the subalterns' issues are raised by the educated and intellectual section of the society (as the poet of the story makes an attempt to do so) it remains unheard as the powerful section of the society applies all the

strategies to foil the raising of voices of resistance. It only reflects the role of the authors as very vulnerable in the face of the manipulative forces applied by the dominant class, represented in this story by the king who stage-managed secret killing. The political strategy of secret killing is presented in this story as a legacy passing on down the ages of history for promoting the interests of the ruling class. Thus, the story investigates a serious political crisis of late 1990s in Assam in a broader context of power politics, which also encompasses the issue of textual politics, an interesting topic in the field of contemporary criticism. The way Manorama Das Medhi delves deep into the subject of secret killing establishes the fact that women authors have a strong ability for a very intelligent reading of the current political environment and that is the area where women writers are denied proper acknowledgement.

### **Voicing Ecological Concerns: Purabi Bormudoi and Rashmirekha Borah**

Green studies is now an important area of study in the field of literary criticism. Literature based on subjects drawn from the world of nature are no longer seen as innocent reflection of the writers' pure love of nature, but is examined as a terrain of conflict between contending forces like man vs. nature or culture vs. nature. The intrusive practices of mankind in the world of nature are widening everyday and at the same time a parallel development in the positive direction aiming at preserving nature's right is also seen emerging in the discursive space of both fiction and non-fiction. As a serious drive to critique the anthropocentric design of dominating the space of nature is getting momentum, writers are now increasingly drawing materials from the world of nature to explore the consequences of the man vs. nature conflict for the entire planet.

Rashmirekha Borah has written a story "Iyat Nadi Achil" (There was a River Here) which focuses on a subject that has been making headlines for quite some time. The narrative of the story visualizes the impending tragic death of a river due to the construction of a big dam by the authority, which is totally indifferent to the pitfalls of violating the space meant for nature. People would say: There was a river here. The river was the life-blood for the people living on its fertile bank. Once the river Xuanxiri and the *oinitoms*, the Mising Bihu songs, complemented and sustained each other. People believe that construction of a dam enraged the river deity, Donyopolo, and it brought in devastation to the lives in the neighbouring areas. Facing the barren landscape, Jairam, an old man now, feels nostalgic about a time when yellow mustard plants in the field were swaying in the air that was replete with the sweet and soft tunes of Oinitoms. Now his son earns his livelihood by working in the dam-construction site

and despite that he resolves to join the sea of people protesting against the government move to construct the dam in Xuanxiri. These people are guarding not only their future on the bank of the river, they are also trying to protect the future of this planet in the face of increasingly invasive anthropocentric designs. The narrative of environmental protection and the discourse of modern development are at loggerheads in the recent times as the issue of constructing big dams in lower Xuanxiri raises serious questions about ecological imbalance that could threaten the survival of the flora, fauna, village economy and the very fabric of culture of the community life in the surrounding area. Rashmirekha's story textualises the nature-culture debate in order to generate awareness about an impending crisis concerning both nature and mankind that requires conscientious human approach. While the dominant authority in the name of progress and rational thinking valorises the grand narrative of modernity and development, her story casts doubt over the argument and deliberates upon the need for mass resistance.

It is to be noted that in Rashmirekha's story, nature-culture debate is presented outside the orbit of eco-feminist ideology, a belief and practice that women and nature share a common ground. Eco-feminism claims that woman is instinctively closer to nature and the latter's safeguard is only in the hands of woman. This is the ground upon which Purabi Bormudoi's story *Hunting (Mrigaya)* is thematically embedded. The story describes the adventures of a group of hunters hailing from the city in the interior of Pavo reserved forest. While for the city dwellers, hunting is an escape-route from the ennui of urban life, for Ahmed, the villager who was hired by the group as its guide, hunting is his only means of livelihood. The narrative of the story draws constant parallels between a woman, Ahmed's wife, and a deer hiding behind a bush in its desperate attempt to save herself from the hunters:

Ahmed's wife hated to see her husband go on such assignments. Once he had mistakenly killed a pregnant deer. When he was slitting its stomach, the unborn foetus had spilled out of its stomach. After that, Ahmed gave up going to the jungle for a long time. His youngest son died soon after from a bout of fever. Perhaps it was due to this sin.....

Amal, a young adventure-seeking hunter amongst the group of city revellers in the world of nature, had delusions that the eyes of the deer resemble those of Ahmed's wife: "Why, how could they be the same, how could they speak the same language---man and animal?" Amal, however, is different from the other hunters since with his guilty conscience he knows that like

the deer he is equally vulnerable to the fearful prospect of being a victim in this violence-ridden world:

He too was a prey of circumstances, disappointments and resentments; he too was a victim of insecurity and betrayals. And most of all, like others, he was a victim of a loveless, cruel world. He could not escape once the hunter pinned down the target.

In this world where humanity is crushed to death, human beings have only become 'packets of meat'. Amal realizes that in a horrifying reversal of relationship, the desert-sands of cruelty are expanding into human hearts and humanity itself is turning into victims to be preyed upon. It is this ability to come out from the comfort zone through a self-realization that 'we are the hunted' that we might strive for building a ground on a sense of solidarity and empathy to ensure security for both man and nature. Purabi Bormudoi has written a number of stories to explore the possibility of creating such a ground. In the story "Rod Boroxunor Suwali" (The Girl of Sunshine and Shower), a beautiful tree and a sprightly young girl have become one single entity in the imagination of the narrator. In yet another story, "Nadi Aru Aranya" (The River and the Jungle), the boundary between nature and the human world collapses as the woman in the story defines her identity, her past in terms of the jungle with which she has been emotionally attached since childhood. As she partakes of its identity, the jungle too becomes one with her. If the cautionary narrative of *Mrigaya* documents a bleak future for mankind under the prevailing circumstances of man-nature conflict, Purabi Bormudoi has a number of stories to her credit where she constructs counter-narratives to establish her belief that man-and-nature alliance is not a utopian dream.

### **Rereading Canonical Texts: Shristi Shreyam**

In the previous section, we have thrown light on the reconstruction of mythical stories and folktales from a gender-oriented perspective. Gender, however, is not the sole motif in the rereading praxis in the field of short story writing by the contemporary female writers. We would like to make special mention of a story named "Agyatabaxot Godot" (Godot in Exile) written by a promising young writer, Shristi Shreyam. As the title indicates, this story is a reconstruction of the famous Beckettian protagonist Godot in *Waiting for Godot*. In this reconstructed tale, Godot is a major narrative voice who confides in the frame narrator his secret that he finds pleasure in a life of seclusion, unseen and unwanted, because he is haunted



all the time by the knowledge that people are hounding after him to have an appointment with him. To hide his identity, Godot introduces himself as "Anadi", a name suggesting something or someone that has no beginning. To his utter shock and surprise, Godot, however, finds that people in search of Godot invade even the most secluded place of the world. Entering a temple, Godot encounters another startling revelation that God Himself is waiting for Godot. When asked for, God has bestowed the ability upon Godot to remain in secret exile, but now Godot is wondering: Should he disclose his identity before God? Is it possible when he is hiding his identity just because of the God-given gift of un-recognition. In the post-script of the story the all-knowing frame-narrator re-surfaces with the news that Godot is not hiding himself in any secret location but is moving around amongst us although we cannot recognize him on account of the God-given gift. Godot, like us, is bound by a compelling existential situation, a predicament that he invites upon himself. In this re-rendering of the Beckettian play, the author, as we have seen, makes an interesting attempt to explore the situation of absurdity concerning not only all mankind but also God and Godot, the searchers and the searched for. Looking at the situation from the perspective of Godot, the narrator finds that everyone in this world lives in an existential trap, everyone including God, Godot and the human beings suffers from individual choices and bears responsibilities for them.

Arupa Patangia has reconstructed film discourses in a story titled Kuruswua's Dream, My dream and Their Dream. The narrative of the story alludes to a symbolically suggestive scene about a frog kept in a glass box in an Akira Kuruswua film as the recurring motif of the present story. The cinematic episode evokes such feelings and impressions in the mind of the narrator that she identifies the enigmatic position of the frog in the glass box with the problematic location of a woman who is bound by societal norms but is aspiring for freedom. The thread of intertextuality in the context of this story assumes particular significance in view of the fact that the generic language of film is appropriated here in order to invest a familiar situation of everyday life with wider connotations.

We believe that the brief snapshots of examples and overviews cited above adequately justify that women's short story writing is more than allegories of gender subordination as it offers a space for investigating all areas of life spanning from the local to the global. Women are as conditioned by the forces of history as men are and being historically situated they feel the same compulsive urge to explore all areas of experiences of which gender constitutes only one shade. Yet the question remains: Do women react differently from men when it comes to dealing with issues and problems beyond the parameter of gender? It will be quite simplistic

and presumptuous to answer in terms of a single 'yes' or 'no' as the nature and quality of female responses cannot be ascertained without taking male writings into account for an exhaustive comparative study. Despite that, we can say with some sort of certainty that even different women react differently to similar issues and concerns and there is no such thing as essentially female responses. To promote the myth of a typical female response amounts to preserving the old stereotypes regarding women. Lakshmi Holmstrom, editor of *The Inner Courtyard*, an anthology of Indian women writings in English as well as in regional languages, explaining her purpose of publishing the anthology, points out that 'women's story necessarily tends to be one of rural exploitation and victimization or of urban loneliness'. Her stated purpose therefore was to explore 'complementary and challenging representations of a variety of women's experiences'. In our study of Assamese women writers' short story writings the truth of variety of women's experiences is brought to the fore with the particular emphasis that being historically located women writers cannot ignore the socio-political forces which constitute women's transitional identity.

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