



SNEHA DEVI

Transcending the Limits

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The prevalence of the custom of child marriage in the early part of the 20th century put a full stop to the dream of pursuing education in the life of many minor girls in India, and Sneha Devi's instance bears a testimony to such cases of glaring gender disparities as child marriages prevailing in the colonial Assam. But the limiting circumstances of her early marriage could not dampen her creative spirit at all. Renowned writer Sneha Devi was born in the year 1916 in Rajamaidan of Jorhat. Her father was Nandeswar Barua. She got married to Dr Dinesh Chandra Barua at an early age when she was still studying in class five. The marriage ended her formal education. Though she studied upto class V, she was able to overcome her lack of formal education by strong mental strength and tireless effort.

Sneha Devi's tryst with the pen started through a poem, titled *Prayojan* which was published in a magazine named *Saumarjyoti* in 1952. But later she shifted her medium of creative expression to short story writing. Her first story *Juarar Pichat* was published in one of

the issues of Ramdhenu in 1953. In the same year Ramdhenu held a short story competition in which Sneha Devi won the first prize for her story "Suchona". This was the turning point in her life as she emerged as a promising short story writer and could draw the attention of her contemporary readers and writers since then through her short stories. Her stories were marked by a rare insight into the complex and multiple selves of her female protagonists. Since Sneha Devi's husband was a doctor, she met many patients at home and in the process she was able to gain insight into the psychology of different sorts of people. The intimate knowledge of the inner recesses of human mind formed the bedrock of her stories and accounted for the sensitive portrayal of human life in their narratives. Sneha Devi, married at the age of 13 and a mother of two children, had to become a widow at the age of 46 as her husband died of cancer in 1962. The underlying vein of tragedy in her stories may, to some extent, be attributed to the trials and tribulations that the writer had to face in different stages of her life.

Sneha Devi had four collections of short stories to her credit. The titles of her collections were: *Krisna Dwitiar Jonak*, *Sneha Devir Galpa*, *Sneha Devir Shrestha Galpa*, and *Sneha Devir Ekuki Galpa*. It was for the fourth collection published in 1988 that she was honoured with the Sahitya Akademi award in 1990. Sneha Devi's stories are marked by an underlying conservative temperament as the women in her stories are not rebels and they do not intend to cross the boundaries of the traditional society. In the story "Bichitra", a girl the daughter meekly submits to her mother's wish to marry her off to a rich but characterless man. She has suffered for her decision but protest against the injustice has remained an impossible dream in her life. In another story titled "Katha Achil", Sneha Devi's resignation to fate and the given system has come to the fore through the protagonist's belief in afterlife. Love which is not possible in this life will surely be possible in the afterlife—upon this faith rests the character's calm resignation to fate as shown in the story. In the story "Nam Dim Kalyani", Sneha Devi seems to convey the message that a complete woman is one who lives for others and takes care of others without self-concern. In yet another story "Bandhu Tumi Mur, Tumi Satru", an educated Brahmin widow refuses to subscribe to the very idea of getting remarried to a goodnatured man and finds the therapy for personal suffering in social work. Thus it can rightly be said that Sneha Devi's characters could not think of flouting the age-old social customs and socio-economic problems remained marginalized in her stories. But at the same time it has to be acknowledged that her stories open a window to the complex female psyche which so far did not attract the attention of the male writers. The subtleties of such emotions as love, jealousy and hatred lying deep at the core of the female mind were the major preoccupations in Sneha Devi's stories and in their portrayal she demonstrated an unprecedented skill and an interest which was unparalleled during her time. In the language of eminent critic Upendra Nath Sharma, Sneha Devi filled up a lack in Assamese short story writing by her intimate observation and skilful depiction of

human emotion which had till then remained almost overlooked in Assamese short story writing. It may be mentioned that her stories have received all-India recognition. Two stories written by her have been included in two collections of short stories published by National Book Trust of India

In 1990, Sneha Devi was awarded the Sahitya Akademi award for her short story collection *Sneha Devir Ekuki Galpa*, but she couldnot receive the prestigious award since she died the same year . She was also conferred theBasanti Bordoloi award by Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1987. Considering the constraints under which Sneha Devi had to pursue her literary interest, what she achieved was indeed a pathbreaking success and will always remain for the young generation of women writers a lesson on how to surmount limitations and prove one's worth. □□