



POLYPHONY IN ASSAMESE FICTION: A STUDY OF SELECTED ASSAMESE NOVELS

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Abstract: Novelistic narratives differ in their style, form and techniques from the other literary genres. The narrative perspectives, narrative voices, portrayal of characters, use of language according to differences among the characters, layering of the storyline etc. provide a veritable ground to understand and analyze novel as a distinct genre. Regarding the narrative voice and perspective, one may figure out two distinct styles in one of which the author acts as the omnipotent narrator representing the consciousnesses of his characters and in the other, the narrator retracts from being the authoritative dictator and presenter of the voices and consciousnesses of his characters; thus providing a ground for the flawless figuration of the characters as distinct individuals with their unmerging voices from one another. The second type of narrative style features in the polyphonic novels; a type of novelistic discourse coined and identified by one of the significant critical thinkers of Russia, Mikhail Bakhtin in his principle of dialogism and especially, in his study of the novels of Dostoevsky. Polyphonic novels present multiple voices of characters along with the narrator which are unmerged to one another and uttered distinctly from one another; thus creates a symphony of the voices of the characters engaged in an interaction in the novelistic space. Novels constitute a healthy body of works in Assamese literature that started with the first attempt of Padmanath Gohain Baruah in 1890 when he wrote *Bhanumati*. With the course of the growth of this genre, many innovations in style, and narrative, thematic concerns and also in language has taken place among which this paper attempts to select two modern age novels of Assamese literature; one by Arupa Patangiya Kalita entitled *Fenalee* and the other by Nandita Devi entitled *Bangal Bahu Dur* so as to examine how this two novels have employed polyphony in their narratives; thus trying to focus how has Assamese novel transcended its regional barrier and evolved to be universal per se.

Index Terms: Polyphony, Assamese Novel, Narrative style, Dialogism

I. Introduction:

One of the significant novelists and critics of nineteenth century England, D. H Lawrence presents a discussion on the nature and prowess of novel as a genre in his essay “Why the Novel Matters?” and comments that the novels are the bright books of life. Novels are capable of reflecting a comprehensive image of human’s lives rather than showing it in pieces; thereby novelists are higher in position than the other professionals like the doctors, lawyers, and physicians or such. Novels in Assamese literature like that of any other literature constitute a large body of works starting with the first novel *Bhanumati* by Padmanath Gohain Baruah in the 19th century. Due to the western influences that gradually took over the different dimensions of the Assamese lived lives; visual shifts and changes in the literary scenario too were to be traced. Novel writing appeared as an outcome of this new wave of influence transmitting through different factors like education, cultural blending and assimilation, language adaptation, social ambitions and so on. The initial years of Assamese novels were characterised by less number of production, linear narrative style, monologic structure, truthful reflection of the lived social life of Assam and most importantly the opinions and status of the Assamese people during the colonial reign. The novelistic genre has been upgraded and strengthened by the works of novelists like Rajanikanta Bordoloi, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Mamoni Roysom Goswami, Jogesh Das, Soyed Abdul Malik, Homen Borgohain, Dhrubajyoti Hazarika and many others till date. However, the successive novelists have experimented with the genre from time to time by adopting new narrative styles and techniques so as to upgrade the outputs of the genre. Non-linear narrativity, flash back and stream of consciousness techniques, intertextuality etc. are prominent in the modern age novels of Assamese literature which provide a fertile area of research. Novels, as they reflect the contemporary society and its politico-cultural realities, have proved to be a powerful means for Assamese writers to showcase the authentic ethnic, indigenous lives of its people, the acculturation and assimilation took place in this land from time to time, the crisis and conflicts that disturbed the land, the popular faiths and beliefs of its people and so on.

II. Statement of the Problem:

Assamese novels have been analysed and studied through different theoretical and thematic aspects by the researchers of the state and beyond. However, the stylistic aspect of these texts still requires extensive analysis. This paper attempts to discuss two selected Assamese novels written in two different timelines; one by Arupa Patangiya Kalita entitled *Felanee* and another by Nandita Devi entitled *Bangal Bahu Dur* to see how these two novels have shown the Assamese lived lives of its people in two distinct time periods and how have they employed polyphony so as to reflect the vibrant socio-cultural lives of Assam through multilingualness or heteroglossia.

III. Research Methodology:

The methodology adopted for this study will be fully analytic and descriptive. The primary resources will include the two novels, *Felanee* and *Bangal Bahu Dur* and the secondary resources like journal articles, research papers will also support the data analysis.

IV. Theoretical Analysis:

The novelistic narratives are specific also in technique, style and their pattern that differ from any other genres of literature. Many critics and authors have dealt with the discussion of the features of novelistic narratives from time to time right from the inception of this genre among which the name of the Russian critical thinker Mikhail Bakhtin is significant. Bakhtin promoted the status of novelistic genre to a higher degree through his critical commentary and justification of the same who opined that the novelistic space is dialogic and it is rendered by the dialogic relations pondered over by the narrator/author with the characters or characters with the other characters inside the text. Dialogic is a concept propagated by Bakhtin which is a kind of communication of thoughts, ideas or concepts engaged in a dialogue for interpretation. These thoughts are already uttered by individuals and are re-uttered and carried forward by successor speakers in different social, cultural or linguistic atmospheres. It is a process through which meaning is evolved out of interactions among the author, the work and the reader or listener. In literary works, it showcases the different points of view of the characters rather than expressing one and confirming to the authorial voice. Bakhtin delineates the features of dialogism in three different ways as mentioned by Omid Amani and Zohreh Ramin in their essay “E. L. Doctorow's *The Waterworks*: A Polyphonic Novel”: (1) Interaction between the “authorial language” (generally that of the narrator) and the language of the protagonist; (2) interaction between the protagonist's language and that of other characters in the text; (3) interaction between the language of a text or a protagonist taken as a whole and the language of other texts to which explicit or implicit allusion is made. Dialogism is made evident through a couple of linguistic and stylistic techniques like polyphony, heteroglossia, chronotope, carnivalesque etc. as mentioned by Bakhtin which he observed in the novels of Dostoevsky. Polyphony among all is a stylistic approach executing on the linguistic level of a text where multiple and unmerged voices are seen to be presented; voice of the author, of the characters and of the narrator. It highlights plurality of thought, voice and insights that participate in a dialogic relationship. It “encompasses not only the transcribed dialogues among the various characters, but also the implicit voices of the characters...the thoughts and consciousnesses of the different characters, the explicit or implicit voices of the author, and even the voice of the reader(s) who engage in a dialogue with the novel” as explained by Uma Viswanathan in the article “Polyphony of midnight's children: dispersion of voices and genres in *Midnight's Children*”. Thus, polyphony that performs in novelistic genre showcases how many different voices may interplay in a provided space without mingling with one another and sustaining the essence and solidity of each and every voice. A polyphonic novel can be distinguished from a monologic one on the basis of its multi-voicedness and the languages through which these voices are represented.

V. Textual Analysis:

After having a clear understanding of what polyphony is, the above discussion is enough to provide the base for analyzing the two selected texts through a polyphonic lens. The first one as mentioned above is written by Arupa Patangiya Kalita who is one of the significant voices in Assamese literature and who is highly regarded for her apolitical and realistic representation of the Assamese socio-cultural lives. Polyphony is employed by her in the narrative even though unconsciously, as she has not mentioned about this term in any of her interviews and writings, when she pens down her characters as they are in their real lives. She recalls meeting most of her characters in real life during her service tenure in Tangla, one of the remote small towns in lower Assam. She explains in one of her interviews with an Assamese news channel that she possesses her characters first in her own self, nurtures them, realizes their essence and then puts them on the pages of her fiction. In *Felanee*, she presents the society of a rural landscape disturbed by agitation, dislocation and insurgency, a scenario of the lives of people in the refugee camps in those disturbed lands. Readers are introduced to a society lived by the ill fated, poverty stricken, suffering human beings on the face of the insurgent activities. Here lives the barbars, the street vendors, the daily wage workers, the small book stall keepers, tea stall owners, roasted rice selling women who visits the houses to sell their products. Their use of language, their livelihood and their ideas encircle around their victimized life and the changing socio-political atmosphere around them. Their lives are described with the word 'putigondhomoi' i.e. a place like a lavatory where no one can stay healthy. Felanee is a word derived from the action of throwing away or feloni; a girl here is named after this action who was thrown away after her birth. This symbolically refers to the underprivileged lives of these people whose lives are so ordinary to be regarded. The narrator here appears to hold the fingers of the readers and take them to eyewitness the tragic and pathetic lives of these people through her narrative prowess. All the characters talk to each other; express themselves in their identical ways in their specific languages and the readers can distinguish their voices from one another. Vijay, a local boy of the area speaks to Moni like this: "ki hol be? Babur maal Ani de jaldi". Moni who comes newly to the place and learns the language and asks Vijay: "Tahator ki sodai enekoi kamani hoi?" Bolen, a neighbour of Monir maak calls her by a pronoun 'Kurmani' which is very specific a pronoun used by the villagers in their close relationship. Kali burhi tries to teach Monir maak courage when she says: "Meye manush ei jalar dore hoba lge. Dekhat chot, kintu mukhot dle jolai dbo pare". Readers can get the essence of the sentence and the message she directs to Monir maak by saying this. A local lady scolds a man who peeps through her wall: "challa maiki manuh dekhile khojuwotit thakibo nuwara howo. Mar sun ei bujri marole Sai eta suhuri". This is a very typical way of scolding the cheap men by less educated or even illiterate village women. A group of agitators threatens the newly settled habitants of the land: "sun, mod Jodi kunubai beso ba bonawo, ba juwar adda bohuawo, ki hbo janoi" where the readers can feel the fright as felt by the downtrodden targeted people newly settled there. The women characters here talk to each other in colloquial dictionary, call one another as 'toi', use slang and express their emotions in unfabricated languages. The narrator, however, is also participating in a dialogue with the other characters simultaneously explaining and commenting in standard diction; thus adding up another voice to the

polyphonic in the narrative. Thus, the wholesome meaning of the novel is symphonically made possible by the subplots and the dialogues uttered by the characters based on their existential leanings in the society and the language they speak.

In *Bangal Bahu Dur* by Nandita Devi, the readers are exposed to an almost hidden picture of the Assamese social life i.e. the lives of the people of lower Assam which is not much extensively portrayed and discussed. The characters here are from the very remote rural areas of this part of Assam who speaks different dialects and live a life very intricately designed with diverse human emotional exchanges. A lot of people from here are Brahmins and are well versed in astrology by dint of which they once and till now too go faraway places like Birbhum, Raiganj and other rural areas of Paschim Banga or West Bengal and the borderline areas of Bangladesh in search of employment opportunities as priests and astrologers. This however faced a backdrop during the political conflicts that shook the Bangla speaking country at one point of time. The once home for many a families of lower Assam there were shattered away and they were bound to return back home in an uncertainty. The narrator keeps on describing the events that take place in the lives of these people, but characters independently speak out in their own tongue about their emotions and experiences through a lot of monologues, stream of consciousness speeches and even dialogues. Bangla Pite, the protagonist, his wife Kalindi, his elder sister in law Priyamvada, the caretaker of the Moujadar's house Uddhav, his wife Moni, the villagers of Gandhiya and its nearby villages – all speak in the Kamrupiya and Nalbariya dialects when they converse with one another whereas the narrator who participates in the narrative as an observer and commentator speaks in standard Assamese language. Through the description of the lived lives of these people, readers come to know about the very unique and characteristic lifestyle of these people; about the herbs they use to cure themselves, the customs they follow for the birth and the death events, the superstitious and blind faiths, the symbols of aristocracy and so on which are presented through unique dialectic dictions and expressions. Bangla Pite replies back to his elder sister-in-law to praise her cooking skill of Payasam; as she asks “Kene hoic haa payas? Sod hoic na?” and as he replies back “Nohbo na sod? Bor sod” (43); the readers can feel the essence of the in depth emotion the characters express. When he talks with his wife about their younger son who was imprisoned for false reason, the readers get to sense the emotions of a tensed parents who seems to become helpless: “Mathatu borke biheisi ee”

“Dintu kom ghura jai na? lal sah alp dim na”

“Naoman pasot db roh”

“Solitui ba ki koissi...” (174)

When Uddhav visits Bangla pite's house, Kalindi gets excited to see him and says: “Haa Uddhav bapa dekhon. Korpora bhuyan futi ollak ee eto” (204) and readers too can feel the emotion behind the expression. The couple that is so stressed due to the absence of their son as he is imprisoned on the doubt of aiding the communists and there is no information regarding his whereabouts, become so happy to see one man from their motherland who

has come to empathize them. The inhabitants of Bengal where Bangla pite lived for the whole of his life till the displacement due to political upheaval talk to him in Bangla, like: “Are thakur moshai mone hoy! Hothat kore kotha hote aaslen?” (186), the communists utter their slogan “Nangol jar amti tar”, the supporters of Muslim league utters their slogan “Ladke lenge Pakistan”. Reference to the customs and practices of the lower Assam people is also made like the mosquito chasing festival or *Bhalbholka* where a specific song is sung by the cowherd boys:

Ooh Hori Mohoho

Moh Khedba Jao joh

Mohe bule mollu de, Tepol pura khalu de

Tepolot nhol lon, Saul lage don don

Saul nedi dilak khori, mohor maak gel mori (p.p 65)

Thus, so many voices of characters and renditions of cultural background of those people are represented in a symphonic pattern by the author whereby their distinct identities are safeguarded. The voices are unmerged as the readers can distinguish among the voice of the narrator, the characters hailing from different socio-cultural backgrounds.

VI. Conclusion:

In both these two novels, polyphony executes in an intricate manner providing spaces for representation of multiple voices, ideas, concepts and perspectives. The two authors have diverted from the monologic narrative style as they have denied fitting dialogues in the mouths of their characters which are never justifiable. They have very realistically portrayed the two distinct realities of the society with all its diversions and peculiarities so that the readers experience the polyphonic taste employed in the narrative.

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