

CONSTRUCTING ETHNIC IDENTITY IN RAJANIKANTA BARDOLOI'S *MIRI JIYORI*: A (POST) COLONIAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE TEXT

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: The purpose of this study is to understand the concept of ethnic Identity projected in the early novels of Assamese literature. This study also investigates a colonial narrative in the text and tries to understand the present scenario highlighting the past.

Methodology: It is a descriptive analysis based on qualitative method research. Focusing on the concept of ethnic Identity the research has been done under the discourse of postcolonial literary theory. The data and speculation are drawn from the secondary sources. Any kind of technical software has not been used in carrying out the research.

Main Findings: The research brings out to the forefront that even in the colonial period; the native writers seem to be conscious about their own culture and the society. They were aware of the marginal boundary created by hegemonic colonial products. The writers raise the question of constructing 'self' and 'other' and a developing sense of cultural hierarchy.

Applications of this study: This study would help to locate the space of marginalised society in that colonial construction and help the researchers to understand the gap between the early Assamese literatures of the colonial period. Moreover, the study also finds out the awareness of the writers even in the colonial rule about the peripheral boundary and ethnic Identity of a multiethnic/multilingual society.

Novelty/Originality of this study: It is certain that Assamese novels have been studied under various theoretical frameworks, but as we are concerned this theme has not been discussed yet for this particular novel. The presentation of the colonial past in the text is the originality of this research.

Keywords: *Ethnic Identity, Miri Jiyori, Postcolonialism, Assamese Literature.*

INTRODUCTION

Assamese literature marked its step towards a new literary form by the publication of Padmanath G Baruah's *Bhanumoti* (1890), which of course, opened up for experimenting with a different attitude of Assamese society and culture. Following the same genre, Rajanikanta Bardoloi's *Miri Jiyori* (1895) foregrounds a tribal (ethnic) community for the first time in the Assamese novel integrating an ordinary folklife (Kakoti, 1953). While on the one hand, it celebrates the Mising (then Miri) culture; on the other hand, it presents an exotic picture of the community's core cultural behavior. During the colonial period, it seems that there has always been a colonial dialogue between the 'self' and 'other' in many ways (Baruah, 2008). Since Assam was under the colonial rule, Assamese writers had faced and experienced the colonial power (Medhi, 2008) very deeply. The native people were being represented as 'other'. Maybe Bardoloi could sense those divisions while he was working as an ethnographer under the British government. Apparently his reaction and attitude towards the community presented in the novel were sponsored by the colonial hegemony. Indirectly he looked at the things through the eyes of the colonizer's perspective. So that he could not touch 'the heart of the community'. This paper would try to look at the representation of Mising community drawn in the novel from the postcolonial approach.

As Mishra rightly pointed out that Rajanikanta Bardoloi (1869-1939) introduced a new trend in the Assamese novel by bringing the ordinary life of Assamese people which were absent in the earlier novels written by Padmanath Gohain Baruah (1871-1946) and Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864-1938) (Mukherjee, 2002). The ordinary life presented in his novels is mostly drawn from rural folk of Assam. In *Miri Jiyori*, Bardoloi weaves a story of the last decades of 19th century Assam. Since Assam was under the colonial supervision from 1826 (Sharma, 2011) and the colonial rule had left no stone unturned to exploit the property, native land, indigenous culture of Assam and had played a major role in bringing the ethnic conflict by breaking the unity of native people (Baruah, 2005; Chaudhury, 2017). Hence, as Sarma (Sarma & Goswami, 2011) pointed out that the colonial attitude, colonial thinking, western beliefs, styles had also influenced the Assamese writers of colonial times. Interestingly, Bardoloi was then an official ethnographer under the British government. The colonial influence on him could be traced in his novel *Miri Jiyori*. Reviewing "Edward Said and Postcolonial Theory," Shehla Burney has rightly pointed out that postcolonialism does not simply imply "after the end of colonialism" but also "after the ear of colonialism started" (Burney, 2012). Mack-Canty points out that it also indicates the continual existence of a colonial legacy (Mack-Canty, 2004).

Therefore *Miri Jiyori* has a great relevance in reading through a postcolonial approach. For this study, the English translation of *Miri Jiyori* (2012) done by Suranjana Baruah is considered. As the paper concentrates on the themes and the essence of the text, therefore, it will not provide any argumentative remark on the technical side of the translation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Colonialism talks about the relationship between the colonized people and their colonizers. Colonialist ideology was based on the colonizers' assumption as Lois Tyson points out that this assumption is due to their own superiority, which they contrasted with the alleged inferiority of the native people (Tyson, 2015). The colonial body defines the native people as savage and undeveloped. In addition to this, the colonizers construct a notion for the colonial people, so that the colonized people can be "considered 'other,' different and therefore inferior to the point of being less than fully human" (Tyson, 2015). Thus the realization of 'us' and 'them' is protuberant in all the colonized countries, which divides the world into two different parts. Hence the question of Identity has always been controversial in postcolonial periods and literature. If we come to the context of Assam, we find a never-ending conflict of this issue. It is noted that Assam came under the rule of the British colony immediately after the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 (Deka, 2020). The question might arise that this might be the official entry to the province for the rule, but prior to the official date, there had been the colonial power in Assam, and just like that, even after the end of colonialism, Assam was not free from the colonial attitudes (Roy, 2005). It was the colonial time when new policies were formulated and eventually differentiated Assam and Northeast as hills and plains, tribal and non-tribal bodies. This escalates a new ideology on politics, which seeks a demand for the re-organization of Assam. As Bora puts in her article "colonial subjectivity and subjugation and its consequences to new equations of contemporary politics" (Bora, 2020), Assam is more than what we understand now. There has always been a historical root of all the conflicts. Besides the tribal question of Assam (Misra, 2016), a continual conflict and reconciliation has been growing up along with the question of ethnicity (Goswami, 2014) ever since. What they (i.e., Bora, Misra, and Goswami) have argued in their articles, the longingness and desires are still present in the socio-political census. One of the reasons behind this can be argued as the fragmentation of colonial hegemony. The literature form this land raises this issue. A serious intention of looking back to the vigorous past and an urge to reconfigure the Identity encapsulates the postcolonial literature (Walder, 2010; Sarkowsky & Schulze-Engler, 2012). In the historical records, it is found that there has been a struggle of various ethnic groups and student body movement raising issues like ethnicity, language, and status in Assam (Sharma, 2016; Saikia, 2006). The Mising also has on the verge of reconstructing Identity and therefore, undertakes ethnic movement (Borah, 2012). Sometimes we fail to locate the historical relevance and the sources of historical nuances of causing this issue, but it is pertinent to look at the ethnographical and the colonial root and from an outsider point of view (Sengupta, 2006). Thus, the going back and revisiting the literature came out on these tropical issues might be interesting in looking at the entire perspective from a different angle. Colonial literature is one of those intriguing literary canons that lead us to revisit the ethnic communities' past while taking account of/from post-colonial resonances (Young, 2016).

On the other hand, Ethnicity has been regarded as a kinship phenomenon, which is a connection within the self and the common ancestors. Partly Ethnicity is experienced as being bone of their "bone, flesh of their flesh, and blood of their blood....we recognize ethnicity as a tangible, living reality that makes every human a link in an eternal bond from generation to generation—from past ancestors to those in the future. Ethnicity is experienced as a guarantor of eternity" (Fishman, 1996). Ethnicity has a great impact on colonialism and vice versa. Sometimes this ethnicity is being misrepresented from the colonial lens, and then the movement has started to reformulate or to revisit the ethnicity to locate the indigeneity and alternative Identity (Go, 2018). In doing so, the discourse has come out with this post-colonial productivity. We read the text, and the subject interrogating the processes, values, and results of colonialism. Thus we read *Miri Jiyori* as a text influenced and prescribed by the colonialism.

The assertion of the Identity of different ethnic groups and communities (e.g., Chutia, Motok, Moran, Tai Ahom, Koch, Tea-tribes, etc.) is seen crucial in recent days (Konwar, 2020; Kalita, 2019; Karmakar, 2019). And it is also believed that Identity is a fluid construct (Bardhan & Zhang, 2017). In a heterogeneous land like Assam, the issue of asserting Identity is totally a 'fluid construct.' In recent years for many political causes and innuendoes, the ethnic communities show less interest to integrate along with the term 'Assamese.' While on being a metonymy, all the communities want to ascribe to their own individual enterprise. This is not an issue of only a political or societal one (Shingha, 2018); we must look into the ethnographical/ethnopolitical conduct of this position. Since the product of colonialism has to do with it, this issue demands a looking back to the society and culture of the colonial period. *Miri Jiyori*, as noted above, makes a clear picture of colonial subjugation and treatment to the ethnic belongings of the land through the eye of the narrator.

METHODOLOGY

The postcolonial approach reads a text considering and identifying the sign and effects of colonialism (Mtairi, 2019). It also identifies the impact on the literary text and identifies the position of the writer and his narrative voice (Mahmudah & Munawwar, 2020). Looking at the binary opposition, we would be broaching the postcolonial attitude towards the complex condition of colonial occupation (Gandhi, 2019; Upstone, 2016). Since postcolonialism covers, all the complexities that started from the imperial process (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2013), as a discourse of understanding literature, we would be looking at the process of affirming ethnic Identity on the ground of language, history, and culture in the text. For the study, various critical discourses are conceptualized as a secondary source (i.e., books, journals, etc.). The primary source/text, Bardoloi's *Miri Jiyori* would be analyzed by employing the method of deconstruction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first Assamese tribal narrative novel, Bardoloi's *Miri Jiyori* tells a love story of a Mising couple living in the banks of the river Subanshiri. The novel "effectively depicts the cultural moors of the community concerning its festivals, worship, integrity existence in harmony with nature and environment without any overt political undertone" (Borah, 2015). But the novel has faced various criticisms on not presenting the Mising tribe as it is. The critics have pointed out that the characters are dressed like Mising community rather touching the heart of the community. However, the novelist's effort seeks readers' attention. The depiction of the Mising society's social life, including its customs and festivals, can't be ignored. In the words of Satyendra Nath Sarma, *Miri Jiyari* is a piece of raw gold fetched from the river Subansiri" (Sarma, 2004; Borah, 2015).

The various stages and times of Panei's journey from home to the world are significant in searching for her inner truth and Identity. The journey also reveals the cultural nuances of Miri society (hill and the plain) and the Assamese society as well. Apparently, *Miri Jiyori* is a love story within a clan and "the subsequent trauma of an unwed mother and the travails and suffering that she had to go through. The author was clearly appropriating an ethnic Mising society to Assamese middle-class morals, and for all practical purposes, it was an Assamese middle-class narrative with the characters bearing Mising names. In an ethnic community like the Misings, there were inbuilt social mechanisms that could accommodate unwed mothers and resolve forbidden love. It was the ethnic women who had to bear the mainstream 'gaze' and become the object where patriarchy generated moral codes played out, in short, a kind of gender stereotyping that sadly persists even today" (Sarma & Goswami, 2011) as Mishra states that the protagonists "became the victims of a hostile patriarchal order that totally disregarded the claims of the individual self in the human relationships. The cruelty and inhumanity of tribal customary laws have been effectively presented by the novelist" (Mukherjee, 2002).

The depiction of Ethnic society in *Miri Jiyori* is done from an outsider's point of view. Keeping the assumption constructed by the colonial opposition towards the 'subject', Bardoloi has represented the Mising community as somewhat uncivilized. In the introduction part of the English translation of *Miri Jiyori*, Baruah brings the references that while collecting the materials for Gait, Bardoloi collects the materials for writing a novel on tribal society. "Bardoloi had been allotted the task of collecting historical and ethnographic material on the province by Sir Edward Gait who was then working on his epochal *A History of Assam* (first published in 1905). It was while he was carrying out these duties that Bardoloi was able to gather material for, and start, his writing career (Barua, 2012)". Calcutta educated, an ardent appreciator of western literature Bardoloi's consciousness expatiates this hegemony. In *Miri Jiyori*, we find allusions from Goldsmith, Wordsworth and Burns poetry. He has also adopted a narrative where the narrator stands outside the boundary of Mising community.

Bardoloi's *Miri Jiyori* effectively unfolds nineteenth-century Mising cultural and religious sites. Missing people worship nature and read fortunes and eventually tell the future by observing nature. The river Subansiri plays an important role in the novel as well as in the real life of the Mising community. The river Subanshiri was also worshiped by them. For instance, Panei vows to *Karsing Kartan* (heaven) not to be departed from Jonki in front of Subanshiri river (Barua, 2012). Again in the chapter *By the Riverside*, Bardoloi mentions to the reader as a third-person narrator that Miris are more attached to mother nature, as it is narrated "these children of the Miri tribe cannot live without mother...they are worshipers of the 'Mugling Mirema', to whom they pray during the Sorog Puja to keep them calm and composed" (Barua, 2012) and then they sing "oh thunder and Lightning, we pray to thee with this five years old, white hooped and tusked pig" (Barua, 2012). Even though Bardoloi is being criticized for some misrepresentation of Mising culture, he has made an attempt to portray the society honestly by saying, "Miris do things as per their customs" (Barua, 2012). The incidents narrated in the story speak clearly that the Mising community is superstitious and they believe in divination.

Bardoloi has celebrated the culture of the natives in both ways, as he never intended to hide the shortcomings without any critical or judgemental eye. The incidents took place in the courtroom, expatiates the binary construction. When we see the attitudes of the *babus*, and the bench of the day where the court is more interested in the *bihu dance* than their problems, this implies that the problem that to be solved is mere a petty thing for them. Again in another incident, the hill *miris* are depicted as less human beings. Instead of showing a little respect towards their culture, the hill *miris* are represented as uncivilized. As the novel reads, "a few of the shameless fellow stuffed leaves of trees in their pipes lit them and puffed. They had slaughtered and spiked two pigs – from the rectum and out from the mouth – and had put them up whole on a spit, roasted them. Even as the blood oozed down, they cut out a few pieces and ate. The fiends were satiated with that. And then, with hands drawn and legs spread out, like some forest animal, they sat down. It was their Council Day" (Barua, 2012). But when the narrator says "Miris are simpletons ... in the first place" (page 34), "reader, have you recognized them" (page 39), "he was also a Miri youth and he was also strong" (page 40), "we have told you earlier also that the Miris is one-sided race" (page 44), we find a significance in representing the native culture as perceived by the outsiders. It clearly signifies that the author has played a dubious role. The narrator looks the community through the eyes of the colonizers about what do they feel, what do they think and how do they behave towards the 'other'. It can be understood through the given examples of how the Identity is politicized and how the post-colonial subject is formulated through hegemonic western lenses. It can be understood how the meaning is made through differences and binary oppositions (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 2008; Burmeyer, 2012). Thus these manifestations of

uncivilized, barbarians, savages, superstitious in the text resemble the understanding of colonial 'other.' Having said that, Bardoloi was presenting the culture the way it was. Investigating the center and a kind of resistance towards the 'norm' or 'civilized' propagated by the colonial power was present in the novel. Maybe that is how, at some point, he felt and reacted rather configuring Bhabha's (Bhabha, 2012) concept of 'mimicry' (Nishiyama, 2019). The novel is not only a pen picture of an Assam's ethnic tribe, or it cannot be asserted only with the words that it is the first novel that writes about a tribal community. Behind all of it, it connotes a different layer of understanding of colonial products filed in the Assamese mindset. Reconsidering the ethnic original community's name from 'Miri' to 'Mising' is also a construct. That is what the story has to deal with. It opens up several questions while 'reconsidering the assertion of ethnic identity' (Borah, Deka & Bhuyan, 2020; Das, 2012) and the status of the scheduled tribe to some of the communities of Assam at this juncture. But as Medhi has figured out that 'asserting identity' has become increasingly fashionable in postmodern times (Medhi, 2016) and which is not an exception to Assamese identity politics.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, Bardoloi's attempt to represent an ethnic social life in Assamese literature is pioneering. Looking at the things from both the perspectives (insider and outsider, celebration, and shortcomings) provides a different understanding of the text. This portrays the impact of the colonial system of education, cultural difference, discourses, and narratives. No need to mention that at the beginning of the Assamese novel-writing tradition, Bardoloi has paved the way for representing a place, self, history, race, and ethnicity as a counter-discourse for colonial narratives. On the other hand, searching for Identity is one of the most integral features of colonial society which started during the colonial rule (Dizayi, 2015). The novel gives a vivid picture of how the society was configured during the colonial time. But again, a question of doubt remains unsolved that whether this text can be read from the postcolonial point of view as it gets published in the initial days of colonialism from the land. So the 'post' of postcolonialism cannot be defined adequately through this process of articulation! One may find that the 'colonial ethnography and anthropological approaches in the post-colonial Assam play a very crucial role' (Bordoloi, 2014) in the present understanding of this identity crisis. This text gears up to look into the context more ethnologically in future research. Even in the days of crisis for the people of Assam, where a group of people feels self-realization of becoming in the mainstream of political and social discourse tremendously, whereas another group feels critically left out (Mitra, 2016), in this context how can we locate the bigger Assamese Identity? Eventually, the NRC and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protest render a rethinking of the whole idea as a nation and Identity (Talukdar, 2020; Basu & Das, 2020; Sharma, 2019).

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

This study was carried out with the paradigm of post-colonial literary theory. Investigating an early Assamese novel, the study locates the position of the marginal community and its related issues in the colonial situation. No other observation has been made apart from this issue. However, this study opens up an ample critical understanding of the text that can be carried out in future research such as the issue of language, geography, space, etc.

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