

# Fictionalising Women's Lives: A Discussion of Three Fictionalised Biographies in Assamese

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Women's lives have found space in written words just a few decades ago. The lives of women, even the extraordinary ones goes undocumented. But the trend is changing with more and more biographies, autobiographies, fictionalised biographies coming into existence in world literature. Quite a few women writers from Assam have also taken the onus upon themselves to document the lives of women who have given a direction to the process of identity formation. Re-imagining women through fictionalised narratives gives the writers the freedom to explore the facts about the women whose lives have not found much space in any narrative. The form of fictionalised biographies use the inventory of narrative strategies, plot models, models of female subjectivity and political agendas involved with the lives of women artists.

In the twentieth century feminist movements biography has played a crucial role in restoring the forgotten women into the cultural memory of a region. Feminist biographers have been documenting women back to record, thereby beginning, as Sara Alpern points out, a new gender consciousness to a genre that was once a men's territory. (Alpern, 1992). As for fictionalized biographies, an increased interest has been seen on the part of writers, in the lives of women artists since the 1970s – particularly in Britain and the USA as part of the feminist project of reclaiming neglected historical figures and thereby helping to establish a female line of tradition. Biographies, including fictionalised biographies became an instrument to bring back the memories of the persons long lost in history and construct the realities that had remained in oblivion. This effort of writing biofiction has added to extending a person's afterlife by adding them to a society's cultural memory and it reconstructs the realities of the past. They provide a scope for remodelling female achievement or failure and thus have an impact on the construction of gender identity. Accounts of the lives of women offer a particularly

rich field of inquiry in this context as they are less represented in the recorded history of the time they belonged to. The position of these women as pioneers of non-traditional lifestyles can be brought out by biographical narratives and the fictionalized biographies offer a powerful conflict between historically specific ideals of femininity and the lives led by the exemplary women of the past.

The fictionalised biography is an intriguing hybrid genre, placed, somewhat uncomfortably, between historiography and the art of fiction. This intermediary place allows the works to ignore the accuracy of a biography and the compulsion to base the work entirely upon verifiable documentation. The writers of fictionalised biographies enjoy greater freedom in expressing and representing the lives of the people they are concerned with. The narrative privilege of these works lend them the quality of being fascinating reading retaining at the same time the flavour of biographies.

This paper attempts to analyse three biographical novels, namely 'Abhijatri' by Nirupoma Borgohain based on the life of the first firebrand woman of Assam, Chandrapova Saikiani; 'Swarnalata' by Tilottoma Mishra, that documents the lives of Gunabhiram Barua and his daughter Swarnalata at the junction when the Bengal Renaissance influenced a handful of Assamese enlightened minds, and 'Debobala' by Manikuntala Bhattacharyya that depicts the life and work of an incredible woman who turned an entrepreneur at an age when women spent their days indoors. These three are biographical novels based on historical facts about three great women that document the conscious identity formation process. The paper makes an attempt at re-reading the three texts that fictionalized the woman protagonists who can be said to have represented the new consciousness of the colonial and postcolonial women.

One of the prominent freedom-fighters of pre-independent Assam, Chandraprabha Saikiani (1901-1971) was a forgotten figure at the time of her death. Even the prestigious award of Padma Shri that she received on her deathbed, did not stir the collective memory and consequently no great interest was shown in her achievement. It was during the last part of the twentieth century, when women's movement was picking up its momentum, this revolutionary woman of pre-independence era was given her due credit. Nirupama Borgohain who fictionalised her life in *Abhijatri*, herself admits that the main inspiration behind writing this novel was her feeling of guilt that not much have been written about Chandraprabha, the flag bearer of women's liberation in Assam in the early part of twentieth century. Borgohain, in the preface to her novel, thankfully acknowledges Puspallata Das's rendering *Bidrohini Chandraprabha*, which brings out the legendary life of Chandraprabha, and her efforts to change the lives of woman of her time. It was the efforts of women like Puspallata Das, one of the leading voices of modern Assamese identity, and Nirupama Borgohain, who is also a great advocate of women's liberation, the forgotten figure of Chandraprabha Saikiani was restored into public memory. Her contribution as freedom fighter and social worker, as a force behind the Mahila Samiti movement, as a feminist and as a rebel in her private life is now being documented and the struggle of a woman in the 1920s to establish her identity against all odds, have become a part of our cultural memory. Chandraprabha Saikiani was also an original writer putting her feelings in paper quite openly at a time when women were not known to voice their opinions in public. But her writings did not get much publicity as it was difficult even for the male writers to publish their work during those days. Chandraprabha's entire life was a struggle, on the personal front, in her literary pursuit as well as in her efforts to unite the women of her time to come out of the patriarchal domination. This journey has been traced in an enticing tale of this legendary woman in *Abhijatri*, Chandraprabha's life is stranger than any fiction and Nirupama Borgohain has rightly claimed that there has been no need to create any other imaginary character to render the biographical details in a fictionalised way. The life led by Chandraprabha shows her sincerity, her rebellious nature, her courage to stand out alone against all odds and the supreme belief in the power of woman. Till

then women were denied education, the girls were married off early in their teens and they led lives of domestic subjugation under the rule of their father/husband/sons respectively without raising a voice. In that context, a woman trying to come out of a remote village in Assam and educate herself to secure a prominent position not only for herself but for women in general, has inspired Borgohain to write the book.

*Abhijatri* has traced the eventful life of Chandraprabha from early childhood at Daisingari village of Kamrup district to her emergence as a freedom fighter and leading light of the women's movement in Assam. Chandraprabha showed her sheer grit in facing all odds to travel for miles to reach her school and fulfil her dream of becoming an educated girl. During her stay in Nagaon Mission School we can notice the emerging leadership qualities of Chandraprabha who makes her Christian Missionary teachers to respect the Indian girls and treat them equally. The writer has tried to deal with the feelings of a young Chandraprabha and traced her mental growth as an emerging strong woman in a formidable way which became evident even before she came into contact with the nationalist leaders. Her courage and conviction in the nationalist cause and in women's issues made Chandraprabha the first Assamese woman who spoke from a public platform and captured the attention of the audience with her oratorical prowess. From a very young age Chandraprabha devoted herself actively to organisational work amongst women and during the crucial years of the Quit India Movement, she was arrested and jailed for her organisational activities amongst the villagers in the Bajali region of Kamrup. The story of Chandraprabha's active political life has been convincingly portrayed in the novel. Chandraprabha's personal life, which includes her relationship with Dandinath Kalita, had led to a lot of unkind gossip. On the other hand, Dandinath Kalita refused to accept Chandraprabha, the mother of his son, as his legally wedded wife because of his inability to take a bold stand against the conventional moral codes, on the other hand, through his letters, he tried to control her life and ridicule her views on women's emancipation. Chandraprabha was an unwedded mother and her decision to give birth to the child conceived through her relationship with the illustrious writer, Dandinath Kalita, was an act of supreme defiance of social taboos

that victimised the women. When men commit moral transgressions society is ready to forgive and forget. But the concept of justice changes when applied to a woman. Even when it comes to publication of the works of Chandraprabha, her fictional works are victims of such unfair notions of social justice. In her non-fictional writings, on the other hand, Chandraprabha appears as the mature woman who has been able to successfully achieve sublimation from her private grief and channelise all her energy into the public sphere where women hardly has any visibility in her own time. Her writings reveal her determined effort to universalise her own suffering by taking up the cause of all the suffering women of the world. But, Chandraprabha had no romantic illusions about the nationalist agenda of the leaders of the freedom struggle. From her own experience of life she knew that the resolution of the woman's question was impossible without conscious activism on the part of the women themselves and she had realised early in life that the burden of giving leadership to such a movement lay on her own shoulders. *Abhijatri* successfully draws our attention to such significant issues which are relevant for the study of the nationalist discourse and the woman's question in Assam. A hundred years ago, when Chandraprabha tried to inspire the villagers of Bajali with the message of freedom from colonial rule and women's emancipation through modern education, her image was that of a fallen woman who "wears sandals and rides a bicycle". Hundred years since then, the image has changed completely. "She was a good woman", say the villagers. The personal reflections with which the book ends do not seem out of place in an otherwise objective presentation of historical facts. The author has stated in the Preface, that she took up this task of writing about Chandraprabha, as a tribute to an extraordinarily gifted woman whose life and work continue to inspire every Assamese woman who is sensitive towards women's issues. It is justifiable that a sensitive writer would sometimes react emotionally when she is overwhelmed by shared memories of an oppressive past.

Apart from the reprint of her only novel, *Pitri Bhitha* (1937), and inclusion of a short story, "Daibagyaduhita", in a collection of women's writings, her works are yet to be collected or reprinted. The male-dominated Assamese literary establishment has not taken notice of Chandraprabha Saikiani as a writer,

even though many lesser male writers find a place in the literary canon. Nirupoma Borgohain has voiced the turmoil of the writer Chandraprabha in the novel through the words of her subject herself, how the injustice of the time in rejecting a woman as a writer and her association with Dandinath Kalita did not change anything in her literary career. Chandraprabha, is shown as a woman of sheer determination and conviction who was at the same time a single mother entrusted with the task of bringing up her son. Her personal and public life, as well as the contrast produced by it give the fictionalised biography the credit of being a true rendering of a women's quest for identity and her place in the process of nation building. Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata* is a biographical novel of rare brilliance depicting the intellectual and social environment of an era. The novel, published in 1991, is set in Assam and Calcutta in the latter part of the 19th century, an important period in Assam's history. Christian missionaries played a key role in the transformation that Assam was going through. *Orunodoi*, the mouthpiece of the Christian missionaries, incited a renewed interest among educated Assamese people in national consciousness, language and literature. On the other hand, Bengal, which had become part of the British Empire a century earlier, was already witnessing what was known as the Bengal Renaissance, thanks to the Brahmo Samaj movement led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. In *Swarnalata*, Misra has portrayed Gunabhiram Barua, an English-educated man and a senior government official who, influenced by the Brahmo movement, advocated widow remarriage and women's education. *Swarnalata*, the title character, was his daughter. Barua lived by example. Gunabhiram Baruah was a great harbinger of Assamese modernity. His exemplary life of marrying a widow after the death of his first wife and staunchly supporting equal rights and education for men and women projected him as an exponent who sincerely worked for the cause of women. Though there was no formal education system for women in Assam, he made sure that his wife Bishnupriya should get at least home education. Barua and his family pursued Western education while holding their own literature and culture in high regard. He is religiously liberal although he hesitates to send *Swarnalata* to a Christian missionary school because it propagates a particular religion. *Swarnalata*'s liberal thinking was

propagated by the family environment. Barua appointed Panchanan Sarma as a private tutor for his daughter before sending her to Bethune School, Calcutta. Against all odds, Swarnalata's parents wanted to prepare her as an ideal for the new age of consciousness. Swarnalata learnt from her parents about the values of modern education and religious tolerance. Gunabhiram rationally tried to give an inquisitive Swarnalata the idea of what caste and religion really were. He instilled in her the belief that one did not tarnish one's caste and religion by going to church. In his opinion a person's nature was his real caste. One who possesses a good nature naturally belongs to a higher caste. One who indulges in evil practices actually belongs to a lower caste.

Even an educated person like Panchanan Sarma had to struggle to break free of the prevailing evil customs. His daughter Lakhipriya herself was a victim of superstitions. Sarma gave off Lakhi in marriage when she was a child. Then she became a child widow. The novelist vividly narrates the status of women in the conservative Assamese society of that time, where women's education and widow marriage were taboos, where a widow was forced into a life of austerity, and where a man could marry several times. It was a society where woman was no better than a commodity. When Panchanan Sarma's family came to know that Gunabhiram Baruah wanted their daughter Lakhipriya to join Swarnalata in her lessons, Sarma's elder brother Bholanath lectured on women's education and tried to give the impression that true meaning of women's education lay in their doing their duties well and in providing satisfaction to their husbands at all times. Educated women were considered to be women of ill repute. The rules followed by Lakhi while going to study in Bilwa Kutir, Gunabhiram's house, well illustrate the situation Barua faced for marrying a widow and embracing Brahmo religion. An innocent Lakhi, however, put a pertinent question to the male-dominated society on widow marriage when she asked Lakheshwar, a distant relative what was wrong in a woman marrying twice if there was no harm in a man marrying a second time.

Gunabhiram is saddened by the indifference of Assamese society towards women's education. The novelist describes his feelings in symbolic language: "Watching the dark dense forests on both sides of the river, Gunabhiram was filled with a feeling of despair. Calcutta was lit up by so many glittering lamps. Would

he alone be able to bring some light into all this darkness in Assam?"

The story of the novel, however, gives an indication too that the orthodox society has been undergoing some change. This is evident from Lakhipriya's admission into a boys' school in spite of her being a widow and also from her remarriage with Dharmakanta. Gunabhiram and Bishnupriya also decided never to get their Swarna married before she was fourteen in spite of all the criticisms expected from the society.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the social life in Assam, Swarnalata moving ahead in life by benefiting a lot from the intellectual and liberal environment in Calcutta. The conversation she has with her friends Tora and Lakhi while working for the *Assam-Bandhu* journal at Bilwa Kutir reveals her maturity. While Tora and Lakhi feel sad to observe that girls who stay indoors with their heads covered are seen as the good ones and educated girls like them are termed shameless, Swarnalata boldly puts in: "Our people think that way because they have not learnt the true meaning of women's liberty." At this point we can see how the novel brings to us the Swarnalata of the past as a person of flesh and blood rather than as a figure in history. Tilottama Mishra's own sensibilities play a great part in putting the words to the lips of her characters in a formidable way and portray the reality of the enlightened minds of a bygone era. The success of the fictionalised form of biography lies in these particular nuances of the form.

An important event in Swarnalata's life is the talk of her marriage with Rabindranath Tagore, son of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore. Debendranath, however, rejects the match on learning that Gunabhiram has married a widow. Finally, Swarnalata marries Nandakumar Roy, a doctor who has recently returned from London. Hers is a happy married life until the death of Nandakumar. He dies the day her father retires from government service. After the passing of Nandakumar, Swarnalata gets married to Khirodchandra Roychoudhuri, Principal, Hooghly College.

Swarnalata, despite her misfortunes, faces life with patience and resilience. She does seem lost in a big city like Kolkata with her young children. Towards the end of the novel, she becomes a progressive girl who can take decisions on her life. This is how the writer, through the character of Swarnalata, depicts in lucid

and pleasantly emotional language what Gunabhiram did for women's education and emancipation in 19<sup>th</sup> century Assam.

*Swarnalata* has a special characteristic as a biographical novel. It does not deal with the entire life of the eponymous protagonist, but rather charts her mental growth as a young adult. Novels of this kind in Assamese are very few; more so because the genre focuses on the psychological development of women. In the light of this, *Swarnalata* is a big achievement for Tilottoma Misra and a unique addition to Assamese literature.

Manikuntala Bhattacharyya's *Debobala* is the fictionalized account of Debobala Duwarah, daughter of Magistrate Bishnuprasad Duwarah, who was born in 1908 in Guwahati. Born in an enlightened family, Debobala was fortunate enough to receive higher education in Kolkata but had to leave it halfway through and become a part of the affluent Chaliha family of Sivsagar after her marriage to Jadav Prasad Chaliha. The girl who grew up in total comfort, led a free life, played Tennis, learnt singing, became a wife and a daughter-in-law to spend her time inside the four walls of her house. Taking the responsibility of a large family, bearing the burden of children at a very tender age did not dampen the spirit of Debobala, who emerged as a self-styled woman of power. She not only helped her husband in his work but also carried on her interest in music and art. Later in her life she successfully run the family business, looked after the tea-gardens, opened a movie hall and acted in a few films herself as an actress from an aristocratic background. Her illustrious life is an example of the new dawn that was inciting the women of the twentieth century for asserting their identity. In Manikuntala Bhattacharyya's rendering Debobala comes alive in the pages of the novel as a character whose personal life was the ground that taught her to be an independent woman of the pre and post independence era.

The power of fictionalised biographies lend emotional colouring to the lives of their subjects. It capitalizes on the dearth of historical documentation by adding imagined dialogues and thoughts that create emotional tension. The three biographical novels under discussion broadly chart out the lives of three woman protagonists who lived their exemplary lives in the

early part of the twentieth century. They were the symbols of modernity and the new found consciousness among women which later shaped the lives of the women of their next generation. Their life tales are too strange to be true and the fictionalized rendering of the stark historical and chronological facts enchants every reader and the curiosity grows higher to know more about these women. It is necessary for every age to draw inspiration from the past to build the future. The new found freedom, the quest for knowledge was touching a section of the society at that time. Swarnalata and Debobala had the privilege of belonging to affluent, educated families to receive education, though there were hurdles at every step. Compared to that Chandraprabha Saikiani belonged to a remote, uneducated surrounding from where she started her journey to become a self-styled activist and an upholder of women's rights. The time frame in which these three women continued their journey was almost similar, but their lives bring to us those differences that prevailed in the society of the pre-independent India. The participation of women in the process of nation building in the postcolonial era has been influenced by class, caste, economy, political empowerment, and literacy etc. These three women show how these factors influenced them to take active part in happenings of the society when the British rule was changing the life pattern of entire Indian nation. In breaking down distinctions between public and private histories, on the one hand, and historical and literary study on the other, fictionalised biographies highlight the extent to which 'women's worlds' can command universal significance and, thus, help to re-shape the understanding of history more generally. One can conclude that these fictionalised renderings of the lives of the three women under consideration fulfill this critical paradigm.

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