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Words for the Wronged: ~~Dr~~ Rita Chowdhury

A cold wind from the grey Brahmaputra whipped into novelist Rita Chowdhury's palatial house on the base of the Ramshah hills. That is why the domestic help scuttled around, bolting doors and windows. Nandita and I are ensconced in the living room. Its green walls are unadorned. There is an ornate sofa set with pea-green cushions pushed against the four walls. In the center is a bare table. The look seems deliberately impersonal, utilitarian, and lacking the feminine touch. And it is just as well, for the mistress of the house has no desire to prettify and decorate her surroundings. She has looked deep into the dark heart of life and seen truths that make her readers flinch. Her life is not about bone china and crystal objet d'art, gourmet meals, and pleasant socializing. You are not likely to find her in the kitchen, not if she can help it. Just as she can see the broad bosom of the Brahmaputra from the many windows of her home, she is witness to the wide confluence of humanity moving forward, stumbling, falling by the wayside, picking itself up, and pulled inexorably by the forces of history. And Rita keeps her lonely vigil—tracing this momentous journey in book after book, never missing a beat.

Indeed, Rita Chowdhury is a celebrated name in the Assamese literary firmament. Till date she has penned no less than 14 novels—powerful works like *Abirata Jatra* (1981), *Tirthabhumi* (1988), *Maha Jibonor Adharshila* (1993), *Nayana Tarali Sujata* (1996), *Papiya Torar Sadhu* (1998), and *Deu Langkhui* and *Makam*. She won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2008 for her novel *Deu Langkhui*. She is also a poet and teaches political science in Cotton College. Her verse anthologies are *Xudoor Nakshatra*, *Banariya Batahar Xuhuri*, *Alop Pooharar Alop Andharar*, and *Boga Matir Tulaxi*. Her most recent novel is *Mayabritto*.

Rita walked in, clad in a brilliant blue *mekhela chador* and a wine-red cardigan. She has left her hair open; a small vermilion dot on her forehead and a string of black beads add to her attractiveness. We plunge into the session at once. "You became an activist from a young age," I started. "How did it all begin? Did your family have political discussions at the dining table?"

"Not at all," she said. "My parents were not politically inclined, and I don't remember if we had any such talk. But certain things happened that had a powerful impact on me. My father was working in Arunachal Pradesh as an officer." Incidentally, Rita's father Birajananda Chowdhury was the founder of Jatiya Raksha Vahini and a trained officer of the Secret Subsidiary Intelligence. She continued, "In 1971, he was sent on deputation to the Haflong Training Centre, as base superintendent. There I saw him training East Pakistani men in guerilla warfare. They were Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League cadres. These exercises filled me with curiosity and anticipation. I became aware of a larger world, where dramatic events were unfolding every minute."

"I was about 10 or 11-year-old at that time. I had a cousin, Keshav Narayan Chowdhury, who was general secretary of All Assam Students Union (AASU). He had taken part in the Language movement. I too was drawn to this mass movement against foreign nationals. I had heard about several mass movements throughout my childhood and adolescence. It was thus most natural for me

to be drawn into the anti-foreigners agitation." "So was that how Rita Chowdhury, the rebel born?" I asked.

She gestured toward the table laden with plates of food. "Please eat first." Biting into a chocolate pastry, Nandita scribbled as Rita spoke. "I would call myself a fighter rather than a rebel. I am a nonconformist, an inborn fighter. I have this instinct to protect and protest, which goes right back to my childhood days. If my father so much as raised his voice when speaking to my mother, I would spring to her defence."

"You have often spoken of your sister's death as having a great effect on you."

"Yes, Rupa was my older sister. She passed away within three days of falling ill. The doctor said it was cerebral malaria. My sister was a warm, caring, sweet-natured girl who looked after me like a mother. When she died she was only in class V. I have brought her back to life as a fictional character in my work. Her death was devastating for all of us. I think my childhood ended the day she passed away. The world became dark, full of menace. The old certainties were gone. I had been an unruly, impulsive child and had found refuge in her calm presence. But when she was gone, it was as if I was alienated from the world and I escaped to the world of books. I read obsessively, as if to try and forget the grief that surrounded me. I read Bankim Chandra, Lakshminath Bezbarua, Sarat Chandra, Rabindranath Tagore, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Shankar, and Sankho Maharaj. Though I read to escape this world, the books gave me a vision of it, which helped me to fashion reality with words."

"But the real world kept its hold on you," I said. "This time you were not just a participant in the anti-foreigner's movement, you were a fugitive, hiding from the police. How did that come about?"

"It all started in the small, upper Assam town of Margherita, when I was a higher-secondary student. The agitation intrigued me, and I used to discuss it obsessively with my friends. We circulated

some leaflets among ourselves and were looking for ways and means to play our parts. I was a member of the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chhatra Parishad, and I spread awareness among the people about the issues of the time. Looking back, I realize that I had been impulsive and immature at that time, without a clear idea of my role in this great movement. I was very emotional, and once I cut myself on my left hand and smeared the foreheads of my friends with blood marks as a symbolic pledge. I still have the scar to remind me about it."

"Then, as the agitation gathered strength in Margherita, the police came looking for me. That was the time I went into hiding for a year, staying under assumed names in different places, with families who were strangers. My own home was raided, my brothers interrogated about my whereabouts. My father Birajananda Chowdhury also turned absconder. For months, I had no news of home. I had to make do with the barest necessities and adjust to strange surroundings. Between moving from one safe house to another, there were long spells when I was bound within four walls, with absolutely nothing to do. It was then that I penned my first novel *Abirata Jatra*, which mirrored the drama, restlessness, heroism, anger, and uncertainty of those unforgettable years. After I completed it, I came to know that the Assam Sahitya Sabha had announced a contest for manuscripts based on the Assam Agitation. I sent it to them from my hideout, and it won the prize for best manuscript. For seven months I had no contact with my family. It was as if I had dropped off from the face of the earth. And yet, I was safe in all those houses where the families took me in. Nobody misbehaved with me or reported about me to the authorities. Finally, I was arrested in Silpukhuri, Guwahati, in the middle of a busy street. I was kept at the Guwahati Sadar Thana. They interrogated me for several days and nights. I was not allowed to sleep, to wash myself, or have any kind of privacy. I had to face whole groups of police officers who subjected me to a barrage of questions. They were extremely annoyed when I refused to answer

them. They could not get a word out of me. I would sit on my hair and cover my face with a *gamocha* and close my eyes. Not a word escaped my lips. I would sleep on a table and was in the lock-up for two whole weeks. The police were furious with me. I was a mere girl, and yet, I had defied them by remaining silent. After two weeks, I was sent to Dibrugarh jail. The living conditions became worse. My father was kept in the next cell. The cells were dark, cramped, and stank of urine. Once, a drunk police officer started misbehaving with me. I stretched out my arms through the cell bars, grabbed him and battered him against the iron bars. The jail authorities were determined to break my spirit. I was shunted off to the men's police barracks. I was to spend a night there. I was deliberately exposed to great danger. What could I, a lone woman, do if they attacked and raped me? I sat on a bed in the barracks, wide awake, ready to strike if anyone tried anything. But the men were so gallant. They told me not to worry, talked to me, and even got me *chapatti-sabzi* from the canteen. After that I was transferred to Guwahati Jail again and finally released. I had been arrested twice in Guwahati and once in Dibrugarh."

"The next milestone in your life was your marriage to politician Chandra Mohan Patowary," I said. "As a politician's wife there is a lot of uncertainty, pressures of both success and failure. There was also the security issue. He has been the cabinet minister of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government for two terms and is now president of the AGP."

"Yes, strangely, for 10 years after *Abirata Jatra* I did not write anything. I was under a spell of confusion. Confusion regarding my identity, my place in the world, and the kind of work I wanted to do. After a lot of soul-searching, I knew I had to go back among the people because that was where I belonged. And I realized I would have to do it by exploring the joys, sorrows, hopes, and fears of the people through literature. Interestingly, the period of my creative hiatus corresponded to the nine years of my marriage when I was unable to conceive. In those years I saw the

cruelty with which society treated a childless woman. And when my daughter was born, I began to write again, and in a sense, I was born with her again."

Do you see yourself as a good wife and mother? I was keen to know.

"Well," she smiles fleetingly. "I am a wife who is very conscious of her rights. I see myself as a responsible wife who also plays the role of a mother to my husband. But I am not one for slipping into the mould of the traditional housewife, and I have never spent time cooking and decorating the home. I never nag my husband and give him enough space. Motherhood occupies top priority in my life. I think I am a good mother, but I could have done more. I wish I had spent more time with my son and daughter, instead of having to keep away due to other responsibilities."

Rita is at her most eloquent when she talks of writing. "As a writer, I try to break out of the limitations of being a woman. I have deliberately attempted to not be conscious of the gender identity, and I never feel the need to assert myself as a woman when I write. That is why you will find the humanist rather than the feminist in my work."

What drives me to write is to break out of the shackles of a body-centric existence. I need to ascend from the trivialities of everyday life. Writing for me is not the achievement of fame but a way of giving back something meaningful to the world. That is why, even though I wrote a few romantic novels in the beginning, I later became much more selective in my themes, writing about great issues and entire communities. I am always hopeful that my books will bring positive change in the lives of the marginalized and voiceless people I write about. Writing is a responsible art because many readers believe in my words. I could write powerfully and convincingly about a protagonist who commits suicide, but its impact on a reader could be destructive. But I cannot pretend that my books offer any answers. They only present a true picture. The reader has to take it forward from there."

"I do not fear controversy," she shrugged. "If I think it is right, then nothing can stop me from writing it. When I wrote *Makam*, about the fate of the Chinese uprooted from Makum after the Indo-China war of 1962, a series of letters appeared in a vernacular paper, condemning me for being anti-India and pro-China. My novel *Popiya Torar Sadhu*, which tells the true story of a young aspiring journalist and her ruthless exploitation by certain men, leading to her tragic suicide, did not receive a single review in any newspaper or magazine. My novel *Deu Langkhui* was written after a lot of soul-searching. I knew that writing it could lead to ugly confrontations between the Tiwas and Kacharis. So I chose a veiled character, someone who did not belong to these groups, as the mischief monger."

"Writing is my brand of activism. I have been asked whether I have been influenced by Mahasweta Devi who wrote about the tribals and gave voice to their problems. But I have not been influenced by any particular author. The act of writing is painful to me; I have to do it because many unknown stories need to be told. So I have my corner, my space where I weave my tales, but I also go out frequently to the world to gather the materials I need to write."

"What are the special challenges of penning historical fiction?" Nandita asks.

"The greatest challenge is that there has to be a smooth, seamless blending between fact and fiction. In many such works, the two realms run parallel to each other, without meeting, which proves counterproductive. Another vital aspect is the use of words. Words reflect time. You should be conscious about the fact as to whether certain words were used during that particular time frame. It is also important to be specific about clothes, jewelry, household artifacts, weapons, and tools used by people of that period. While writing *Deu Langkhui*, I had absolutely no written chronicles and had to rely on oral history for research."

Rita's son comes to the room, anxiety writ large on his face. He needs to get a number of things from the market for his school project and asks her permission to take the car. Now her attention is on him, his problem, and we wrap up the session for the day. Outside, darkness shrouds the great river, but the bone-chilling wind whips around, an unrelenting spirit. We hug, promising to meet, and Nandita and I clamber into the car. Before we back out of the drive, Rita is already walking briskly back to her house, without a backward glance.

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Rita Chowdhury's life has seen many trials and tribulations. The blow of her beloved sister's death causes her to still weep when talking about her. As a teenager, she has spent long, uncertain spells away from home, caught up in the cause she believed in with all her heart. Later she got two postgraduate degrees, one in Assamese and another in political science, as well as a doctorate degree in political science, and again, a degree in law. As a writer her canvas has been vast, her themes complex, and narrative many-layered. She has also been the wife of a politician, playing this difficult role even while staying removed from his political affiliations, trying to lead a normal life surrounded by security men and the trappings of a VIP existence. In all the years I have known her, Rita has always seemed to me to be a woman of tremendous resilience. No wonder then that she identifies herself with the character of Tejimola, a beloved heroine of Assamese folklore. In order to understand why, one has to know this story, narrated by countless grandmothers to wide-eyed children in the moonlit courtyards of Assamese homes. It goes like this. A merchant has two wives and a daughter named Tejimola. When the elder wife dies, the stepmother is put in charge of the girl. The merchant goes abroad. Tejimola wishes to attend a friend's wedding. Her stepmother gives her a bundle of clothes to wear at the wedding. When Tejimola opens the bundle, she finds a

mouse and cinders, with the clothes quite ruined. She comes home weeping and is thrashed by her step mother. Then she is made to help in the husking of paddy. Her right hand is crushed under the tooth of the husking pedal. She is then forced to use her left hand, which is also crushed. Then it is her feet that are crushed. After her head is smashed, the stepmother hurries to hide her body under the eaves of the hut where the husking pedal stands. By and by a gourd vine grows on the roof of the hut. When a beggar woman tries to pick a gourd, it cries, "Stop! I am Tejimola and have been killed by my stepmother!" On hearing this, the stepmother chops the vine and flings it away. A tree with sour fruits springs up where it falls. When cowherds come to pluck its fruits, the voice of Tejimola cries out again. This time the tree is cut and thrown into the river. There it grows into a beautiful lotus. Now the merchant returns and sees the lotus. He at once wants it as a gift for his daughter Tejimola. When his boatman stretches out his hand to pluck it, the voice of Tejimola cries out loud. The merchant is astonished. He takes a bit of areca nut in one hand, and a sweet ball on the other and says, "If you are indeed my Tejimola, change into a *salika* (bird *myna*) and take these areca nut pieces, and if not, take this sweet ball." Heeding his words, the lotus changed into a *myna* and bit the areca nut. The merchant puts the bird in a cage, comes home, and asks about his daughter. The stepmother is forced to tell the truth. The merchant throws a kerchief over the cage and says, "If you are indeed my daughter, change into your own shape." Tejimola returns to her old form and the wicked stepmother is driven out.

What appeals to Rita is the indestructible nature of Tejimola. She survives the most dreadful persecution and emerges in a new form every time. She will not be silenced. Her voice rises to defy her tormentor and her fate. What interests Rita is the story of people caught in the vice-like grip of circumstances, people rising up to meet something greater than their circumscribed individual selves, bravely resisting injustice.

One such milestone in Rita's life and the larger life of Assamese nationalism was the movement that began in 1979. But the causes of the movement date as far back as 1826. In our next session with Rita, we sit at a city restaurant specializing in authentic Assamese cuisine. The whole place has been done up in bamboo, the seats too are of hollow bamboo logs, and red tasseled Chinese lanterns emit a dim glow in the dark interior. We have steamed rice with duck curry, dry fish chutney, roasted tomato mash, pork cooked with lai greens, and crisp fingerlings fried with onions and chilies. The meal over, Rita is in the right mood for a history lesson and the teacher in her takes over. "You see, Assam was never politically integrated with the North Indian empires before the arrival of the British. When the British took over Assam after the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, it was the end of 400 years of freedom. The British East India Company had its headquarters in Calcutta, and they slowly gained controlled over the entire Northeast. So much so that as early as 1838 Assam was made part of the Bengal Presidency. In 1978, MLA Hiralal Patowary died, requiring a by-election to the Mangaldoi Lok Sabha constituency to fill his seat. During the process of the election, observers noticed that the number of registered voters had grown dramatically. The AASU demanded that elections be postponed till names of foreign nationals were deleted from the rolls. Then Assam was separated from Bengal in 1874 and brought under the control of a Chief Commissioner stationed in Shillong, which was to be its capital. Sylhet district, populated mainly by Bengali Muslims, was now a part of Assam. You have to understand certain demographic changes deliberately brought about by the British that had very serious effects later. First, they prevented the natural assimilation of various tribes into mainstream Assamese society. Secondly, they brought thousands of tribal laborers from Central India to work in their tea estates. These people were kept apart from the local populace and tension simmered among them. Then they brought in lakhs of Bengali peasants (mainly Muslims) to settle in the riverine tracts and grow crops there. There began a

deluge of these people who claimed land as their own, cleared vast tracts of jungle, and antagonized the local population. As the years passed, they spread to upper Assam. The demography of Assam again saw rapid changes during partition when refugees flooded to the state from East Pakistan."

In this way the religious and linguistic composition changed drastically. The local Assamese people feared they would be turned into a minority in their own land. Thus began the struggle for Assamese identity. The *Asomiya*s found themselves underrepresented in the services and professions. After partition, however, the Hindu middle class were in power after 150 years. Now they tried to establish their cultural identity and seek economic and social equality. In 1972 the AASU launched the *Bhasa Andolan* or Language Movement to make *Asomiya* language as the medium of instruction up to graduate level in addition to English. The state government took measures to do so. Unfortunately, violent riots targeting Bengalis broke out. Both Hindu and Muslim Bengalis were victims. But migration to the state continued.

"Yes, and the flash point was reached in 1979," remarked Nandita, poring over her notes.

"Yes. The Government of India stipulated that elections for the Assam State Legislative Assembly and 12 unfilled parliamentary seats would be held from February 14 to 21. The AASU and the AGP declared that they would boycott the elections, the reason given being that the electoral lists contained names of thousands of illegal migrants who were not bonafide Indian citizens. Allowing them to the vote would automatically confer citizen rights on them. The demand was that all who entered the state from Bangladesh after 1961 be expelled and names deleted from the electoral rolls. What was very disturbing was that the number of registered voters had gone up from 6.3 million in 1972 to 8.7 million in 1979. After many talks, the Government of India agreed to March 1971 as the cutoff date. Later, Indira Gandhi called the elections, which AASU and AGP were keen to boycott. The Bengali Hindus and Muslims

wanted to vote. The elections were also supported by Plains Tribal Class of Assam, comprising of Bodos who wanted autonomy."

"In 1979, Assam witnessed widespread unrest. Bridges were burnt down, and schools, colleges, and offices were forcibly closed. Thousands of state government employees refused to take part in poll duty, and disciplinary action was taken against them, including arrests and suspensions. Bodo tribals attacked Assamese peasants at Gohpur. But what was truly tragic was what happened in Nellie, a region along the south bank of the Brahmaputra. Mobs of Lalungs and Assamese attacked the village of Nellie with swords, guns, sticks, and axes. On February 12, 1983, 1,200 men, women, and children died in Nellie. There was another massacre at Chaulkhowa Chapari in Darrang district and Silapathar in Lakhimpur district. Thousands of people poured into relief camps. Hundreds fled to West Bengal. Elections could not be completed in 16 out of 126 constituencies. In one constituency a candidate was even murdered. Voters turnout was high in the Bengali-dominated states and low in others. Indira Gandhi's Congress party won 90 out of 108, but the boycott was successful."

The agitation continued for five years and ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985. The Parliament passed the Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal Act for detection of foreigners settled in Assam. In 1985, the AGP, which had played a leading role in the movement, came to power.

The succeeding years would see the rise of insurgency in Assam, and the failure of the youth leaders to hold the reins of power. Rita's engagement with the foreigners' movement would be explored by her in two more novels. But something new caught her attention. As a young girl she had heard of Chinese people settled in Makum, a small semi-urban habitat known for its tea and oil industry in Upper Assam. She unearthed the sad chronicle of humble people, law-abiding citizens subjected to tragic displacement and loss. The forefathers of the Chinese had been brought from China to work in the tea gardens by the British in the early

19th century. With the passage of time, their children and grandchildren integrated with the local community by marriage. Many of them also started other enterprises rather than working in the tea gardens. Their safe little world collapsed when the Indo-China war broke out in 1962. On November 10 of that year, 1,500 Assamese Chinese were cruelly rounded up and packed off to congested internment camps at Deoli in Rajasthan before being deported. Almost immediately, the government auctioned their properties. Families were separated, parents from children, and husbands from wives. Today these exiled people live in Hong Kong and in many places around the world. They suffer in silence and long to visit Assam. The trauma of that episode is very much evident among them and there is a need for closure. Rita Chowdhury wants the Indian Government to apologize for this injustice and condemns how a country could turn against its own citizens.

"There were no written materials on what took place in Makum," explains Rita Chowdhury. "It was as if there was a conspiracy of silence. The victim themselves were terrified of baring the truth and angering the authorities. Many of them were old and their memories of those dark days were fading. Nearly a year went by with me trying to win their confidence. I went to South China and, with the help of people whose names I cannot disclose, was able to locate many families who had been separated, displaced, and uprooted. Slowly, as I visited their homes; they opened up and revealed the heartbreak they have had to endure all these years. They spoke in Assamese; they talked of Assamese customs, festivals, food items, and the places they had called home. They brought out old, yellowing letters from loved ones, faded photographs. Tears flowed freely. More than anger it was sadness that was evident on these occasions. They had passed a lifetime of parting and sorrow. Who would ever be able to compensate for that? In their new country China, where they settled after the events of 1962, there had been many difficulties and problems of adjustment.

But they are unwilling to speak about that for fear of antagonizing the authorities."

"Ultimately, it was the three Chinese gentlemen from London, Nepal, and Singapore who joined the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of this momentous event and gave me the perspective needed to pen this saga. When I wrote this book, I had to read about war, the tea industry, history, and Chinese culture. Since there were gaps in the chronology of events I had to rely on my imagination. In the end I used about only 20 percent of my research material. *Makam* was my most ambitious book. It became my mission, and I was driven to tell this riveting story. *Makam* transformed me in many ways. Before writing the book I was a normal woman with limited concerns. *Makam* broadened my horizons, made me rise above trivialities, and reach for that which is noble and eternal in life."

Rita keeps going back to the stirring days of the Assam movement, which changed the direction of her live in momentous ways. "I began to realize the existence of a greater life, something higher than one's personal concerns of daily existence. Spending months in jail, traveling in police vans, hiding in exile . . . these are times which shaped me, made me who I am today. Those difficult days freed me from all earthly desires, so that I am indifferent to material possessions. The movement ended, but I continued my search for a greater life, this time through my writing. Freedom is very dear to me, and I abhor any form of confinement. I refuse to the defined by my husband's political affiliations. But I am not a fixed entity. I too am evolving, and you may notice that through several books I look back on the Assam Agitation through subtly shifting perspectives. My first novel *Abirata Jatra* (1981) covered the frenzy of the uprising and the brutality of the army toward the common people. Mariam was my alter ego; Prithivi, Joseph, and Samudra Phukan were born of my own experiences among fellow activists. *Tirtha Bhumi* (1988) looks back on the movement after its six-year period. In *Mahajibonar Adharshila* (1993), I tried to focus on the frustration and stagnation of the Assamese youth after the

movement and the many repercussions they had to cope with. There is a clear disillusionment, a sense of a dream turning sour. Then in *Ei Samay, Xei Samay* there is a calm and objective evaluation of those eventful years, an examination of its ideology, and the course it followed."

It is not merely contemporary history that Rita Chowdhury is adept in. Her gaze extends far back to the days of hoary antiquity, creating a fascinating world of real, believable characters of an age far removed from our own. Her Sahitya Akademi Award–winning novel, *Deu Langkhui*, can be read as a gripping story of the characters Jongal Balahu, Arimatta, Gangawat, Chandraprabha, and others. It can be read as a historical novel revealing facts about the Tiwas and the Ahoms. It can also be interpreted as a feminist chronicle mirroring the life of Chandraprabha. Chandraprabha, queen of Pratap Singha, is friendly toward the Gobha Raja at the Jonbeel Mela. The jealous king banishes her to the Gobha kingdom. The Gobha Raja acts with honor and does not take advantage of her. The wronged queen familiarizes herself with the local customs and gives up her former identity. The story-telling is vivid, the prose subtle, and the effortlessness conceals the painstaking research that she undertook before penning this wonderful saga.

After the release of *Mayabritto*, which is a complex novel with philosophical explorations, Rita Chowdhury surprised everyone by hinting that it could well be her last work. But to practice any art is to make the soul grow, and Rita would surely not limit her evolvement at the peak of her creative phase. As she has herself admitted, honoring her calling is her way of feeling most truly alive. She is wise not to be trapped by dogma and never lets out other voices drown out her own. In the end, you realize that this solemn woman with her watchful eyes is among the fortunate people who have found a calling that is bigger than they are, a calling that moves them and fills their lives with constant passion and growth.