Male portrait - V

21 May 2013 at 22:23

'Indeed sister', said Dinarzade, 'this is a wonderful story.'
'*The rest is still more wonderful,' replied Scheherazade, 'and you would say so if the Sultan would allow me to live another day, and would give me leave to tell it to you the next night. Shahariar, who had been listening to Scheherazade with pleasure, said to himself: "I will wait until tomorrow; I can always have her killed when I have heard the end of her story'.*

This is a passage from *The Arabian Nights*. Capturing her audience's attention is a matter of life and death for Scheherazade. Married to a sultan who infamously beheads his wives after their wedding night, Scheherazade uses all her storytelling wiles to sustain her husband's interest. Each night, she stops halfway through her tale until the next, when she finishes that particular tale, and moves on to tell another, and so on. So enthralling are the wonderful stories she narrates that each morning, the Sultan reluctantly overcomes his macabre urge to kill her just so that he can find out how the story ends.
In many ways, women writers around the world use words just for the very reason this fabled storyteller did to put off death for another day, a death which is not literal as in her case, but a death-in-life, resulting from the loss of her power of self-expression, fearing the silencing of her literary voice that not only speaks of her torment and elation but also of her angst and protest against any form of oppression, whether by an individual, societal mores or state authority.
Though this series is an exploration of how women writers create their male characters. It is also very necessary to understand that women writers generally have a very vulnerable and precarious existence. As Subhash Chandra writes in *Indian Women Novelists*, an essential requirement of the pertriachal order is the 'angel' or the 'Goddess' image of woman, designed to compel women to be humble, self-abnegating and self-sacrificing. She is always reminded of the "mother" in her - the bounteous giver. This is a collective conspiracy that erodes her personality. Every women is born into what Chandra calls the straitjacket paradigm, requiring her to confirm to pre-determined norms of social behavior over which she has no say. She is cunningly placed on a pedestal, projected as a symbol of beauty, purity, self-sacrifice and moral goodness. She herself then imagines that she wants to be on this pedestal, to win the approval of the very system that seeks to thwart and silence her.
Here is where we women wordsmiths come in. For us, writing is not a leisurely, fashionable, and frivolous pastime. It may be so for some dilettantes, but I struggle daily to prove I am not one of them. For me, writing is a fiercely subversive activity, an anti-establishment stance against everything I consider unjust and deserving of my critical gaze. In my fiction I have treaded perilous territory, exploring the grey underground world of lesbians, homosexuals, forbidden love, the mindless violence of communal riots, the shady underbelly of urban existence, the hypocrisy and double standards of individuals held in high esteem by a corrupt society. Through the words and deeds of four characters of the same family, I have tried to show why the historic student movement in Assam to stem the flow of illegal migrants into the State failed. I have used the shocking image of a catatonic village woman singing lullabies to her beheaded child in an abandoned village hut, in the wake of a violent ethnic conflict. Alcoholics, drug addicts, weirdos, the marginalized – all

have walked across the realm of my imagination. There is also a story where a widow actually expresses gratitude towards an insurgent group that snuffs out the life of her cruel, abusive police officer husband.

I have had the unique vantage point of being a minority in a largely all-male establishment, this newspaper group. Yes, we women are still heavily outnumbered; yes, we continue to work in a high stress environment where the most politically incorrect thing to do perhaps is ruffle male egos. And yes, having worked as a team with men for two decades certainly gives one an insight into how the other gender behaves and thinks; an experience that proves invaluable when creating believable, well fleshed out male characters.

Many years ago, after I had interviewed D Vinayak Chandra, an eminent poet from Kerala, he scribbled these words in my notebooks. “To Indrani, may you have a season of good rains and powerful writing.” These beautiful, eloquent words, expressed by a chivalrous man of culture, have continued to be a great source of inspiration. Some of my readers have called my writing powerful, others have said I display a lot of tolerance. This sounds somewhat paradoxical. Maybe I would like to say powerful, in the context of the intensity of emotions which my characters reveal, and also the vitriol I let out against what I perceive as worth exposing. If I am tolerant, it is in the way I accept that all men and women have unique identities and that a writer has to be non-judgemental and capable of exploring the dualities and ambivalences in every character. And through this literary exercise, I seek, like all women writers, to be liberated from the limits imposed for being a woman, and work for our place in the sun, where we are acknowledged by the strength of our words, and Kamala Das lay critically ill in hospital, and fearing she would die, scribbled her explosive autobiography *My Story*. The irony was, she survived and to her dismay, this work firmly established her as a scarlet woman with loose morals. The point is, if a male writer’s works is considered something independent of the person’s appearance and personal life, why can’t the work of women writers be judged by the same yardstick?

Let us now return to the main premise of this series – understanding how eminent women writers of Assam create male characters and thereby, their interpretation not only of the male psyche but also the male-female psyche equation. Today we have Manorama Das Medhi voicing her thoughts. Born in 1950, Manorama Das Medhi began her life in Bengbari, a small village in undivided Darrang district. She later graduated in Assamese from Handique Girls College and after her post-graduation from GU in 1973, she joined Tangla College and is HOD of the Assamese department there. Das Medhi has penned three collections of short stories, including *Kathghoror Ishwar, Prem Gatha, Saponor Sonaru* and many stories, articles scattered in different journals.

“I mainly write short stories,” she says, “where it is notpossibleto fully explore characters as space constraints arrest their development. I never write a story to focus on my favourite male or female character. I prefer to highlight a social situation in which people are intricately involved. In my book *Premgatha*, there is a story named *Botabarit Abeli*. The protagonist Ratna is an unemployed youth in a world awash with the wave of globalization. He sets up an agency of a foreign company seeking to set up a distribution network. But the high cost of the products keeps buyers away. The frustrated youth has to confront his his worried family. Heated arguments ensure and he leaves home in a huff. On the way, he sees his aged father toiling in the fields, his sweetheart approaching him, and finally the silent,

anguished face of his sorrowful mother. Ratna cannot leave, because his heart beats with love and compassion. Ratna is so humane, and that is the kind of people we need, both men and women, to clear the weeds of a stagnant society. I don't deliberately show a male character in negative light just for effect.Crimes against women are daily occurrences and so regularly reported by the media as to elicit no reaction at all. I once wrote a story called *Pourukh* where seven males brutally torture a peacock and pluck out its feathers. The peacock is the symbol of a girl savagely gangraped by men without the least trace of scruples or compassion.

"In life, the perfect man I have known is my father, the Late Nabin Chandra Medhi. As a student, he was in jail for taking part in the non-cooperation movement. But later on, he never tried to ask the government for any help nor did he plunge into politics. Instead, he worked as a social worker till the end. But I have never written about him. I consider that man perfect who transcends his individual self-interest to work for the common good."

Karabi Das Hazarika is the HOD, Assamese, Dibrugarh University and also Director, Centre for Performing Arts, DU,. She is a prolific writer, having penned four collections of poetry, literary criticism, two novels *Anupama, Aruna, Kusum Ityadi* and *Aranyar Sah.* She has edited the *Kirtan Ghosa* and translated a monograph of poet Jibananda Das. Today she has more than fifty books to her credit.

My favourite male character," she says. "Is the father in my autobiographical novel *Aranyar Sah*. He is modeled on my own father – a simple, compassionate and very humane person who is a doctor and works selflessly for the people. I identify completely with him. I do not see how women writers can have problems creating male characters. They just need to have experience, observation and empathy. No feminist writer has the right to deliberably paint her male characters in bad light. That would be unprincipled. One can do so only if the story demands it."

So, we come to the end of this search. The high standards women expect their men to conform to is sure to make some men uneasy. But the feminine heart is quick to forgive, to accept the not-so-perfect with the generosity inherent in her nature and also with the pragmatism born of experience. If men come even a bit closer to what she envisages, this world could perhaps be a better place.