

Male portrait - IV

21 May 2013 at 22:22

After the first three parts of my exploratory essay *Male Portrait* on the complex and fascinating dynamics of the male-female equation, I deviated from this chosen field to write about a promising Florence-trained artist and then celebrated the rains with *Monsoon Raga*. But then, the most amazing thing happened. I was inundated with e-mails, smses and phone calls by complete strangers demanding why I had abandoned this literary-gender project. My friend, the wife of a celebrated cinematographer, accosted me on the street and looking pretty annoyed, actually asked me point blank for an explanation. My septuagenarian uncle, who had lost his beloved wife and mourned her absence, wrote to me saying how eagerly he was anticipating each sequel. Our career counsellor, absorbed in the running of a new engineering college, found time to forward an e-mail highlighting how women scored over men in making this world a better place. A young man, Monu Deka wrote with disarming candour: "I feel very bad as I am illiterate as far as knowing my mother tongue is concerned. I appeal to those people who want to know more about their literature to come forward and do translation work. This will change the rigid mindsets of the common people who only seek economic gains from everything. Now most of the people boast of subscribing to English dailies and English magazines and they have been forgetting their own culture and tradition."

This sort of reaction was unprecedented in my long innings as a columnist. It taught me that people are not only passionate about our rich treasure trove of Assamese literature, but also evince keen interest in human relationships, thus disproving the cynical, modern day view that we have become sterile and mechanical in our interpersonal relations. In spite of New Age technology, vaulting career ambitions and the pressures of modern life, men and women are still very much clued in as to what they seek from their partner – love, peace, integrity and a generous, all-embracing acceptance of each other's idiosyncrasies.

Mamoni Raisom Goswami, Anuradha Sarma Pujari, Rita Chowdhury, Aroopa Patangia Kalita and Leena Sarma have showed us how they create their male characters, and, in the process, have revealed their personal interpretation of the ideal male. The search for the perfect male is a journey of unexpected twists and turns, with equal measures of elation and despair, humour and irony. But let me hasten to add that this particular exercise is firmly grounded on a feminist perspective. It is women, women writers actually, who are calling the shots here, and determining their personal choice of the eligible male. This, however, should not be construed as an assertion of female authority for its own sake. We in the North-East have been for ages a society in which womenfolk have enjoyed a degree of power which is unprecedented, not to say unparalleled, when compared to the pathetic state of affairs prevailing in the rest of the country, especially the Gangetic heartland. Whether in Meghalaya or Manipur, Assam or Nagaland, women have been major decision makers at the home, the market and the farm. Whether it be *Sati* Joymati, Kanaklata, Irom Sharmila, Rani Gaidinliu, our women have displayed courage and grace under fire, an awe-inspiring ability to fight against all odds and defy the forces that seek to oppress and brutalise them.

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Here I would like to refer to Kate Miller's path breaking book *Sexual Politics* (1970), which was a *cause celebre* in feminist criticism, second only to Simone Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). Millet touched on an issue of central importance in feminist thought, the distinction between sex and gender. While sex is an ideologically determined difference between men and women, gender refers to the cultural differences, the product of social conditioning. This distinction was critical in reconsidering women writers who had traditionally been viewed as usurpers in the male domain of creativity. In focusing on the problems faced by women writers and their treatment in literary history, feminists usually cite one critical text, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Woolf takes as the symbol of women who have been prohibited from freely exercising their creativity the hypothetical figure of "Shakespeare's Sister", one who should have been the creative equal of her brother, but who never had the opportunity to express herself.

More recently, I remember a powerful novel *Escape* by sci-fi writer and artist Manjula Padmanabhan, which released last year. The author has ventured to a realm few have dared to enter. The storyline is stark and disturbing. It goes like this – In a world where women have been ruthlessly exterminated, one little girl remains alive. Her name is Meiji. She has three charismatic uncles, Eldest, Middle and Youngest, who have raised her against all odds. But as her body buds into puberty, her aging uncles realize they cannot protect her from the vicious generals who now dominate their world. Artificially created slaves called drones provide a mutant underclass of workers while marauding bands of witless Boy Soldiers roam the brutalised landscape through which Youngest and Meiji must travel in the hope of reaching the border and an uncertain prospect of a safer life. On the way, Youngest has the daunting task of explaining to his adolescent niece what it means to be female in an all male world and why she must learn to control the powerful forces that are being unleashed within herself as she matures. *Escape* is a novel rich in philosophy and imagination. But more than that, Padmanabhan meets head on a raw fact of our present world – the declining sex ratio and turns it into a vision of the future. When women in general are a vanishing species, there is the distinct and rather dismaying possibility that the woman writer's voice will waver and grow faint in the cacophony of a strident, aggressive male presence. We, the sisterhood, owe it to ourselves to preserve this voice.

This week, we feature a writer who stands out for her unique presence. Writer and art critic Moushumi Kandali first created waves with *Lambada Nachar Seshot*, a collection of short stories that won the Yuva Purashkar in 2005, given by the Bharatiya Bhasa Parishad. Earlier, she had received the Munin Borkotoky award for young authors in 2000. She has two short story anthologies to her credit and her English translation of the oral literature of the Missing tribe was published by the Sahitya Academy in 2008. The translation of *The Diary of a Genius*, the autobiography of Salvador Dali, is in the final stages of publication. A post graduate in Philosophy from GU, she also holds a PG degree in Art History and Aesthetics from the Faculty of Fine Arts, MS University of Baroda.

Says Moushumi, "The character from the story *Tritiyottor Galpa* (A Tale of Thirdness) is my favourite male character. This character of a professor/ dancer, sexually marginalised, is a man who nurtures a desire to conceive the rebellious saint Akka Mahadevi in his imagined womb. The story portrays his triumph over the hostile environs and questions conventional stereotypes. A poetic person who lives his dreams of adopting and mothering a girl

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orphaned by riots. Yes, there is an ideal man in my mind. But he has not surfaced through my pen yet, because I believe there is no ideal man in reality. I want to reflect that reality in its multiple dimensions. The virtues and follies of my characters are independent of their gender. I believe human beings are neither black nor white but exist in different shades of grey. My critics opine that in spite of my women- centric fiction, which are often critiques of patriarchy, I retain an innate sympathy for male characters. Most of the men portrayed in my fiction are sensitive, humane and contemplative about life and the world. They seek their individual *moksha* amidst dilemmas, conflicts, ironies and complexities of their existential realities, whether it is Hangnizi, the Karbi youth from *Lambada Nachor Seshot*, Chitrabhanu, the urban youth engrossed in his journey into cyberspace from the story *ravan1020@fantasy.com*, *Satyabanor Babe Eta Second Chance* or Chakrapani, the struggling sales representative from *Esamayat Ekhan Mahanagarot*. In general, most of my male protagonists are drawn from the contemporary urbanscape and reflect the contemporary ethos."

This serialised essay is a personal as well as collective struggle to understand the intricacies and dichotomies in gender relations. It is also, strange as it may sound, a reaffirmation of faith in love. As Bertrand Russell said it so long ago– "Those who have not known the deep, intimate and intense companionship of happy mutual love have missed the best thing that life has to give." Next fortnight, two women writers will take us to the end of this revelatory journey.