

Male portrait III

This has been a memorable journey a labyrinthine trip into the minds of some of Assam's most interesting and successful women writers. We've come to know how Mamoni Raisom Goswami, Anuradha Sarma Pujari, Rita Chowdhury and Leena Sarma create their male characters. For us, this fragile sisterhood of feminine scribblers (may our tribe increase!) penning our world view, introspecting on our unique life experiences, conjuring up fully formed characters who walk, talk, make love, weep, scream, fight, scheme, hope, dream just the way we want them to, makes us empowered in ways impossible to perceive in a largely patriarchal and conservative societal framework. Our arsenal are not Weapons of Mass Destruction, Kalashnikovs or land-to-air missiles. Our weapons are words, words that dribble endlessly from the tips of our pens, words that heal tortured souls and bridge a fractured society. Our words are like flowers stuck on the barrels of bayonets. Our words burn like acid and expose this world and its people for what they are. We embody *stree shakti* at its most refined and intellectual best. And because in many ways we ourselves have been bullied, intimidated, our spirits crushed and our bodies fettered, burnt and raped even within the so called sacred confines of the familial set-up, not to speak of those who, in the name of religion, terrorise us or make a shameful living by degrading the most vulnerable among us, we know what it is to suffer and to be humiliated and oppressed. So, naturally, our hearts flow out towards all the downtrodden people of this world – men, women, children, with a natural, intuitive affinity and a searing honesty that transcends any selfish, hidden agenda. Having said that, this is not any attempt on my part to demean the work of male writers. In fact, I believe that a truly great writer has no gender. And in our literature, too, we have had immortal female characters created by male writers – be it Rajani Kanta Bordoloi's Panei in *Miri Jiyori*, Birendranath Bhattacharjee's Dimi in *Mritunjay*, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala's Sewali in *Karengar Ligiri*, Homen Borgohain's Subala, in the eponymous novel bearing the same name, and Hem Barua's Mamata (of *Mamatar Sithi*) and Dr Lakshminandan Bora's Basanti of *Ganga Silonir Pakhi* – made into a beautiful film by the late Padum Barua, to name only a few.

Coming back to fiction in general, a writer has to envisage how the characters look, where they are from, what motivates them. Characters grow out of a sense of place. It is the writer's job to give these characters their age, name, background, class. Names have subtext and identity. Even the character's childhood influences must be taken into account. What he/she does for a living, and how far does a character deal with conflict and change, whether he/she will arouse the reader's admiration, or our pity because he/she is an underdog, an anti-hero, are all a writer's business to explore.

Unfortunately, there's a certain kind of critical receptivity, a hope of greatness for certain kinds of books by men that hardly come into play with books by women, no matter how wonderful they are. This is tragic, because women writers have freed themselves to write more forcefully than ever before, to explore much wider issues.

The author of books like *Mriganabhi* (1987), *Maple Habir Rang* (1989), *Murujatra Aru Aranya* (1995), *Kaitot Keteki*, *Arunimar Swades* (2000), and *Phelani* (2007), Arupa Patangia Kalita needs no introduction. She brings an urgent contemporariness and a keen consciousness of complex issues, with a sweeping historical perspective that

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embraces the past, as well as the tumult and restlessness of the modern day youth. She also exposes how religion, caste and creed are used by politicians to destroy human values.

When asked about her favourite male character, she replies: "My fiction is most often content based and I give shape to my characters accordingly, to suit different situations. My favourite male character is Rana in my short fiction *Kazirangat Millenniumor Sapon*. Rana is a very positive man. And yet, he is fiercely anti-establishment and refuses to get into the rat race. Forty-five year old Rana is a bank officer, and his wife is a doctor. Though he is a non-conformist, he is full of humanism and is suffused with positivity. Yes, Rana is based on the character of a man I know in real life. He is a man who has defied society to live on the fringes anonymously as an intellectual. I don't think male and female writers, at least the truly committed ones, have any problems connecting with the other sex. Remember, Charles Dickens created Miss Havisham, Thomas Hardy created the beautiful, unfortunate Tess, and Bernard Shaw his Candida and Eliza Doolittle. Characters emerge from the socio-economic and political forces at a certain point of time. In my novel *Ayananta* (Solstice), there is a tea planter whom I have described as a *Haitha Sarai* – a pigeon who does not stay on the ground, for fear of being preyed upon. So this man does not ever step down from his car. He gave evidence against his own people to the colonial masters. Yes, I admit freely that there is negative projection in my novel *Ayananta*. Togor, an innocent girl, becomes the victim of the tea planter's lust. The elite tea planter has an illegal child called Bogi, who is, ironically, ostracized by society. But we women writers have truly moved way beyond the male-female conflict, to embrace themes of universal oppression – be it the colonial (Britain vs India), the Blacks and Red Indians in America, the marginalised and exploited anywhere in the world. My novel *Phelani* deals with vulnerable women in different life situations. Yet, I would hesitate to call it merely a gender issue. In our male dominated society, it is very difficult to find a perfect man. We very often cannot exercise our choice. We still have very limited access to private property. I believe I can love only that man who respects me as a human being. Rana, my favourite male character, defies this patriarchal set-up. I respect that man who is capable enough not to resist feminism. A man having power does not necessarily have perfection."

So, here we are, travelling on this journey of revelation, so full of strange and exciting twists and turns. Literature cannot exist in a vacuum. Nor can men and women. They complement each other as the sky and the earth, the flower and the bee, the light and the darkness, the canvas and the artist. Next, Marami Das Medhi, Karabi Das Hazarika and Moushumi Kandali will bare their hearts, and their minds. Such a long journey