

Male portrait-II

21 May 2013 at 22:19

Last fortnight, we dealt with the first part of this series on how women writers from Assam go about handling their male characters. If you have read it, you'll remember that Mamoni Raisom Goswami's favourite character was Indranath and Anuradha Sharma Pujari's was Dharani. Interestingly, these two men are not macho alpha males but have a deeply compassionate and idealistic side to them. Their relationships with women are full of integrity and honour. Not only that, these women writers are not enamoured so much of the physical appearance of the characters as the ideals they embody. Writing by women in a patriarchal society is still seen as a subversive activity, and all those who belong to what Nathaniel Hawthorne described as "the damned tribe of women scribblers", still have to prove that they are good home-makers, wives, and mothers, not to speak of being ambitious, driven career women. All these pressures have thankfully, not embittered our women writers and they remain unbiased and open minded when depicting male characters.

This time I have conversed with novelists Rita Chowdhury and Leena Sarma.

This year's Sahitya Akademi award winner for her novel *Deu Lankhui*, Dr Rita Chowdhury's output (fifteen books) is prodigious as it is scholarly. She is at her best in historical fiction and combines scholarly research with deeply intuitive feelings for the past and the people who have inhabited it. Her novel *Deu Lankhui* unveils Tiwa history, the community's ancient cultural heritage and ethnicity. The writer herself is simple, matter of fact and outspoken in her attempt to answer the queries I pose.

"My characters belong to a definite age, social milieu, mental make-up etc. I try to make them as natural as possible. I really have no conscious preference for this or that male character. As their creator, I love them equally."

Is it then difficult for women writers to create male characters? "Hmm..... At one level, yes. Human characters inhabit a complex mental world. It is certainly a challenge to create all characters. As for your question that do we women writers give a raw deal to male characters, just so that we can push our feminist agenda, I myself certainly don't. Regarding the perfect male, I have an image of him and his traits are scattered among different characters I have created. You see, the experiences of people are invaluable. Scholarly research must be based on reality. In the same way, the imagination can also soar only when it is tethered to reality."

Leena Sarma was a brilliant student and rankholder in the Pre- University exam in Arts from Cotton College, with a 1st Class in Economics Honours from Cotton College, a First Class post graduate degree in Economics from Gauhati University. She joined the Assam Civil Service, Class I in 1983. Having worked as EAC cum Executive Magistrate in Nagaon, she was also Deputy Director, Training in Assam Administrative Staff College from 1985-89. She joined the Indian Railway Traffic Service in 1989, and worked in different capacities including Chief Public Relation Officer, Deputy General Manager in the NF Railway. She is at present Chief Commercial Service, Freight Marketing.

In spite of this hectic schedule, she has brought out one bilingual book of poems, five novels and an assortment of articles. Novels like *Adha Saja Pratima*, *Naisabdar Maajat Sabda*, *Sagarika*, *Aabharan*, *Ahna Aparahna*, *Amrisha*, etc carry her vision of the world.

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"I adore all the characters I have given shape to so far through my novels", she begins. "I like Shekhar, the protagonist of my novel *Ahna Apraahna*, a novel based on Railway history in the NE Region. He was accompanying Irena, a beautiful Italian girl who had come to explore her roots in an exotic land, not only as a guide but also as a concerned friend. So many times during the course of my writing, I was tempted to weave a love-story between the two, but every time I had to desist myself from giving a very mundane trapping to a wonderful relationship between two very extraordinary persons. I liked Shekhar, the infallible, because of his strength of character. His suffering in childhood at the hands of his psychotic father could not take away his human qualities.

Another character I like is Mathew, of my novel *Amrisha*, which deals with the generation gap. Mathew, a happy-golucky person, felt claustrophobic inside his home due to all the rules imposed by his serious wife and they drift apart.

"Projection or depiction of a character comes from observation. We interact daily with so many of them in the form of brothers, husbands, sons, cousins, friends and colleagues that our own multi-dimensional thought-world has a very vast segment of their enigmatic thoughts and emotions in it. If a woman doesn't have the capacity to delve into the male's psychic planet, a space that may be a little bit different from hers, she cannot afford to be a writer. Men have fewer expectations from women than women have from men as partners. His needs usually remain limited to a clean home, good food, some amount of care and pampering. A woman always harbours some illusion about her ideal man. You usually find men complaining less about their wives. But husband bashing is a favourite pastime for most of the women. Men are basically very insecure about everything and therefore you can find them competing at every level till the very end of their lives. They talk less about their woes or about their feelings. Women are more transparent and disclose their feelings to select ones. The physical weakness of a woman is supplemented by her mental strength. These aspects are to be reflected adequately in any good writing.

"The tendency to highlight the negative traits of a male character in the writing of women writers is a spontaneous way to get the quickest possible relief from the burdens which the centuries old patriarchal system has been imposing on a woman. That is reflective of the social milieu. What I abhor is the inclination of some women writers to use this as a convenient marketing strategy for selling their product, books in this particular context, and some of them go to a ridiculous length to project a power- struggle within a family or any other social unit as a man-woman conflict.

But many women writers have been successful in depicting poignant human relationships in their true colours through their writings." Does her favourite male character conform to her idea of the ideal male?

"She replies". No. My idea of an ideal male is a blend of beauty, intelligence, wit, success, kindness and maturity. I see no imperfection in such a man of my imagination. In real life, it is next to impossible to get such a flawless character. But, then who can stop me from imagining? My mind and heart are in a different mystical world altogether and I refuse to share what is going on there with anyone, not even my readers. When he doesn't exist in reality, how can I dare to portray him in my fiction?

Shekhar, my favourite male character is dependable, intelligent, kind, mature and successful. But where is the wit? No, he cannot come to the level of my expectation.

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How many of her male characters are drawn from reality? I was curious to know.

"All male characters of my novels and short stories are figments of my imagination. Unknowingly, some real life characters may creep into my fiction. We see, observe, assimilate, do some mental permutation and combination about these inputs and a character comes to life. If a few male characters tend to waver more towards some real life people, it is quite natural. But it is not a conscious effort."

It seems this exploratory series has thrown up some vital issues that affect gender relations. Next fortnight we will meet Arupa Patangia Kalita, Manorama Das Medhi and Karabi Das Hazarika.