Male portrait-I

21 May 2013 at 22:17

What was I thinking when I started this piece? The doubts began almost immediately. We belong to an age where the credit card scores infinitely higher than a library card. Writing about literature, which I am about to do, also seems a no-brainer when the television has made the Indian elections as addictive as an edge of the seat soap opera. The babble of psephologists seems so much more happening than the distant, rarified world of fiction, where words can work their magic only when they are powerful enough to lengthen the attention span of today's average reader. And with the economy being what it is, buying books is already being seen as an expendable indulgence.

However, if you see things from my perspective, you might just be persuaded to think otherwise. Curling up with a good book, preferably borrowed, to suit the penny-pinching times, may be the perfect antidote to your recession blues. When vacations, eating out, shopping and movie-going are not viable options any more, and we are about to hunker down for a spell of enforced austerity, escaping to fiction is a smart way to spend your leisure hours, enriching you, enabling you to transcend your narrow sense of self and reminding you that there are realms of human experience that are beyond the ken of money and commerce.

Salman Rushdie says, "Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truths but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart."

We ought not to think of reality and fiction as mutually exclusive preserves, for it was no less than the Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn who believed that it was the writer's task to transmit the breath of contemporary society, its pains and fears, and warn in time against moral and social degeneration.

I have had many informed people telling me that gender is not an issue any more. Feminists claim to have been successful in forcing men to change the rules in women's favour, at least in developed societies. That is a debatable point and outside the ambit of this piece. But my point is, men and women continue to mystify each other. How would you otherwise explain the reams of paper devoted in women's magazines, men's magazines and even general periodicals to the male-female equation, not to speak of books like *"Men are from Mars and women are from Venus"?* This continuing obsession for finding keys to understanding the opposite sex got me thinking. How do women writers portray male characters? Are women writers constricted by their feminine sensibilities from the ability to create believable, well-fleshed out male characters? Some of the most memorable female characters like Madam Bovary, Anna Karenina, Lolita, or Nora of *A Doll's House* have been created by men. But no credit seems to be given to women writers coming up with powerful male characters, when it was done as far back as in the nineteenth century with Emily Bronte's passionate and troubled Heathcliff. In fact, Virginia Woolf, always ahead of her times, dreamed of the concept of the androgynous self, who could slip effortlessly into both the male and the female psyche. In her novel *Orlando*, she created a character who lives for hundreds of years, sometimes as a male, at other times, as a female. Now that pop-psychology has made us familiar with the duality within us, the presence of the yin and the yang in the self, Woolf's idea doesn't sound whimsical and far-fetched at all. And novelist Pat Barker took it

much further than other women writers by venturing into male territory in her powerful *Regeneration* trilogy on the World War I. And so the idea of this piece was born. Meetings, telephone calls and a flurry of questionnaires followed. The Assamese women writers I talked to ranged from a Jnanpith award winner to a twenty something bright spark. But all of them evinced the same enthusiasm and willingness to talk about their favourite selfcreated male character, the dangers of showing males in a negative manner, the challenges of creating believable male characters, and how far the men created conformed to their own idea of the perfect male.

"Listen Santokh Singh, I have a passion for enquiring about man. Man's blood, the smell of his body, the torment of his desire, his sufferings... everything, all of it, I ache to turn into ink for my pen." These are lines taken from one of the episodes from Jnanpith award winner Mamoni Raisom Goswami's raw, relentless expose of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in her novel *TejAru Dhulire Dhusarita Prishhta*, spoken by the writer herself to a poor half-literate Sikh autorickshaw driver. Inspite of penning novels which can be termed as milestones in Indian literature, Dr Goswami tells me, "I have not yet had a chance to pour my favourite real person into a fictional mould. I had met my dream man, my husband Madhavan Raisom, and spent a year with him, but the themes of the novels I've penned have not allowed me the opportunity to feature him. However, looking back, my favourite male character is Indranath, the protagonist of my novel *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah.* (The Moth-eaten Howdah of the Tusker). Indranath encompasses within him the personality of my paternal uncle Chandrakanta Goswami. Indranath has had the benefits of a modern education and is enlightened enough to be outraged by the monstrous exploitation of the poor by a feudal, patriarchal social institution, the *Satra*. But I have not made Indranath a superman, as I show that he, too, is held a prisoner by the feudal system which divides and embitters the people. Though he feels passion and tenderness for a poor priest's daughter, Illimon, he hesitates and postpones the decision to make her his bride as she is too far beneath his station. He secretly plans to give away his father's lands to the rioting peasants but they misunderstand him and brutally murder him. I don't agree that we, women writers, cannot convincingly create male characters because some areas of male experience are out of bounds. You have to be committed enough to step out of your comfort zone and I remember spending nights at the workers' barracks when they were building aqueducts under the supervision of my engineer husband. Those were risky times as the workers, fearing retrenchment, were a deeply resentful lot and had also carried out *hartals*. This tough, male world was authentically portrayed in my novels like *Chenabor Srota, Ahiron* and *Mamare Dhara Tarowal*. It is not at all difficult for me to conjure up male characters, nor do I have a tendency to project them in a negative light to fulfil any feminist agenda. I have not debased any male character. Instead, I have brought out the corruption and brutality they are capable of as a group, whether it is a trade union, or anti-Sikh rioters, or those at Vrindaban exploiting hapless widows. My idea of a perfect male is someone who is educated and enligthened, not rigid in his views and not insecure about his woman wanting to fulfil her own dreams. I found all these qualities in Madhavan."

Journalist, writer and columnist Anuradha Sarma Puzari, whose debut novel *Hriday Ek Bigyapan* brought in a fresh trend in Assamese contemporary fiction, has penned the Sahitya Sabha award winning novel *Sabhebpurar Barasun, Ejon Ishwarar Sandhanot,*

Kanchan, Baragi Nadir Ghat, Nahararar Niribili Sa, as well as short story anthologies like *Basantar Gan*, *No Man's Land,* a travelogue and autobiographical essays.

With a dreamy smile she confesses, 'My favourite male character is Dharani Das, the protagonist of my novel *Baragi Nadir Ghat*. I created him and then, fell hopelessly in love with him! Dharani is an innocent, self-confident youth with a great physique. Though he is not that well-educated, he excels in sports at school. Fiercely independent, he labours hard to run his own ration shop. In him, you will find the endearing simplicity of our rural masses. But, Dharani cannot take injustice lying down and turns violent. At the same time, he also experiences spiritual awakening by being an acolyte of a seer. Initially wary of women, he loves two women. He saves a girl, Nayantara from killing herself and as their relationship blossoms, he proposes to her. But it is Nayantara who insists on a bond free of legal or social sanction. After her death, it is a Mrs Khanna that he becomes besotted with. Dharani is a person of great integrity and honour and through him I try to show that a male is a slave only to love and nothing else.

"For Indian women writers, it is no doubt difficult to explore male experience. And with men still being the decision makers both within the private and public domains, some amount of feminine angst is bound to remain. But it is not fair to generalise and be prejudiced against all men. Exceptions exist and one's outlook must be broad and tempered with the understanding that every human being is unique. Deep study and observation alone will help us in creating characters. To always have a feminist outlook is anathema for a woman writer."

"I believe it is as hard for a woman to find a perfect male as it is for a man to find his ideal woman. And one's perspective changes with age. The man I visualised as perfect at sixteen is bound to differ from what I would think at forty plus. We like different men for different reasons and relationships are a goldmine for a writer. Most of my male characters resemble men I know in real life. And, by the way, here's a secret. I find it fascinating to listen to drunken men's ramblings. Their conversations reveal a lot more than what they would let out when sober. An introvert and a teetotaller is much more difficult to figure out."

This year's Sahitya Academy award winner Rita Choudhury, Arupa Patangia Kalita and other women writers also share with me their experiences. But their accounts will have to wait for the concluding part next fortnight.