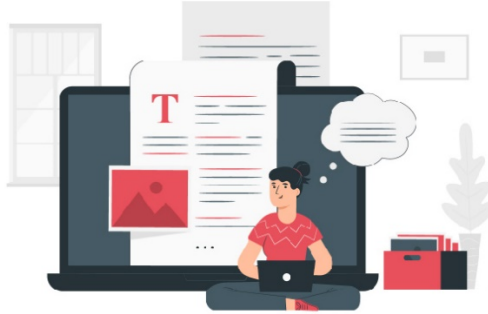


IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

12th Year of Open Access

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal

Vol. 12, Issue - 5 (October 2021)

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Literature versus Society: Reading Homen Borgohain's "Spring in Hell"

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Article History: Submitted-01/10/2021, Revised-19/10/2021, Accepted-21/10/2021, Published-31/10/2021.

Abstract:

The literary landscape of North East India in the Post-colonial era is marked by its persistent engagement with a discourse on societal issues. Be it poetry or drama, novel and short stories, literature has moved away from the 'art for art's sake' propensity to a more meaningful domain of reflecting the plight of the underprivileged and marginalised – a trend which has also shaped contemporary Indian writings in English as a whole. "Spring in Hell", which appears in the anthology *The Collected Works of Homen Borgohain* published in 2017 and a translation of the Assamese novella "Narakat Basanta", is also written in the same vein. What Borgohain presents in the story is the existence of two classes – the privileged and the underprivileged. Adopting analytical method, this paper intends to focus on how Borgohain uses social realism as an effective tool to portray life and society of slum dwellers and also to portray the class conflict between the privileged and the deprived.

Keywords: class conflict, dichotomy, marginalised, slum, social realism.

Introduction

It has been a discourse among both the readers and the writers for quite some time that writings from North East India are essentially concerned with issues, such as insurgency, terror, kidnapping and bloodshed and so on. Many have even gone to the extent of identifying the writings from the region thematically with such issues. One of the prominent voices from the region, Mamang Dai, also refers to many writings from the region as having thematical proximity with 'bloodshed and killings' (Dai 2-7). That has to be accepted to a great extent, for since independence, especially since 1980s, the region has witnessed the emergence of a number of insurgent groups followed by counter insurgency operation. In such a state there is bound to have bloodshed, horror and terror which further have provided ample scope for poets

and writers of the last two decades of the 20th century to deal with these issues. But readers, especially young ones, are bound to make an error if the writings from North East India are considered as having its focus centred only on bloodshed, killings, kidnapping, rape and such other issues. There are many poets and authors who have enriched literature of the region through their writings in various regional languages. Though most of them has remained unexplored, there are a few whose selected works have got translated into English and many Indian languages giving an opportunity to the people around the world to delve into the larger social issues embedded in these writings. These are the writers who considered literature as a vehicle for social reformation and hence tried to reflect society by incorporating social realism in their writings. Social realism, a concept developed in 19th century French literature and consequent upon the Realist movement led primarily by Emile Zola, Honore de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert and advocated by French author and Puppeteer Edmond Duranty (Nineteenth Century French Realism), in its simplest sense is the reflection of contemporary life and society in an unidealized and unembellished form. It became a dominant literary approach in world literature by 20th century. In Indian English literature the writers who took the pioneering role in this direction were Sarat Chandra, Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand. In the post-colonial India there are many poets, novelists and short story writers including R.K.Narayan, Raja Rao, Kamala Das and Anita Desai who have used literature as a vehicle for exposing the social realities with the aim of bringing about social changes. Homen Borgohain, however, may have written his works in Assamese language, but many of his books have been translated into English and like most of the prominent literary figures of Indian literature, his novels and short stories also present life and multifarious societal issues in a realistic manner.

Social Realism in "Spring in Hell"

Though, thematically, "Spring in Hell" centres round the Shankar–Monimala love relationship, the author's intention is not to deal with the theme of love only. Just like the novelist of a picaresque novel, where the hero is an innocent human being who experiences multifaceted societal issues in diverse social settings, with the progression of the story the author makes Shankar introduce to the readers various social, political and economic issues along with the hypocrisy and selfishness of a section of people which make the life of another section very hard. The author explains Julekha's first impression about the slum in this way – 'setting foot in the basti Julekha shuddered in fear and loathing. Into what hellhole had Rahim dragged her?' (372). Through the conversation between Shankar and Himadri, a youth who earns his living by pasting cinema posters and distributing handbills, a glimpse of the slum has

been given. In one of the houses stays a person, named Chimuni along with his wife. They have no children. Though Chimuni works as a bearer and a good human being, his woman is a 'bad sort'. In another house stays Pasu, a day labourer with his woman and two sons. In another house lives Julie, 'a woman of the streets' who has engaged Pasu's elder son as her pimp and to do odd jobs for her. In one of the houses stays Dal Bahadur and his wife Lakshmi; Dal Bahadur is a Chowkidar in a bank and his woman sells liquor and makes some extra-income during the night. Rahim and Monohar, both are rickshaw pullers, stay next to their house. Himadri further says that the inhabitant of the house next to that of his is a person named Joy, a mysterious sort of person who is the only good looking and well-dressed fellow in the entire slum. Everyone in the slum is afraid of him for 'he's one fearsome hoodlum'. Next to the house of Joy lives a sick fellow and his son who steals, begs and stays in someone's house as servant to pilfer in a few days (360).

During his stay at Himadri's small room Shankar notices how the houses in the slum stand jostling with one another. He gets to hear the sound of a baby crying out feebly in hunger, 'a Hindustani woman' rebuking someone in obscene language and the whispers of a couple engaged in a 'love-tiff' (358). All the inhabitants of the slum have a tale behind. He does not give details about all these people, but the readers can arrive at a conclusion from whatever is said about the circumstances which have forced Monimala and Julie to enter into the slum. As far as Monimala is concerned, it is understandable that she has become a victim of the evil design made by Niranjana who by playing the role of a philanthropist brings her to Moriyani only to fulfil his fancies. Shankar was sceptical about his intent of his being a philanthropist and coming to the aid of a 'helpless, beautiful young woman' such as Monimala' (369). When Shankar asks the whereabouts of Monimala, Niranjana explains to him how he helped her in getting a house at a nominal rent. Wrinkling his nose in disgust he speaks as badly as he can giving him the impression that she shifted to the infamous alley only because of promiscuity. The author lets the readers ruminate upon the people like Niranjana and his friend who allowed Monimala to stay in his house at a minimal rent. The following lines are self-explanatory about Niranjana and his friend.

'After venting his spleen against Monimala for some more time, Niranjana seemed satisfied. But certain things he didn't talk about even by mistake – such as, what it was that friend of his sought in exchange for giving the house on nominal rent, and how it was that he had made

Monimala's life hell in the guise of a benevolent friend. But Shankar realised everything.' (370)

Julekha's entry into the alley is not the result of anyone's evil design. Rather it is the hardships in life as well as the influence of the slum that forces her husband to abandon her. She was a girl from a Muslim village in Golaghat district and in absence of her parents she had to be brought up in the house of her maternal uncle though the family did not like her staying with them. It was in that house she fell in love with Rahim, who was from Mymensingh in East Pakistan and was a ploughman in the house of her maternal uncle. Both of them fell in love with each other which led to their elopement one night and after staying a few days in various places they entered into the slum. After that Rahim became a rickshaw puller and passed off initial days very happily despite hardships. However, their happy marital life came to a halt as Rahim found it very difficult to earn his living by being a rickshaw puller. Being frustrated and influenced by the environment of the slum he leaves her one day immediately with the words 'I leave the place to you, understand? But don't snap relations completely. Sometimes I'll need you' (376).

There is no lack of people like Nirranjan who knows how to exploit the destitute. Often the manager of the hotel, adjacent to Julekha's rented house, peeps through a window when Julie takes bath. One day he even throws a ten rupee note at her and makes an obscene gesture. He engages Pasu's mother to convince her for his physical gratification. There are also social deviants like Joy, who makes the lives of both Julie and Monimala miserable. In Rahim's absence he indulges in obscene chat, and tries to tug at Julie's clothes. Though Julekha initially threatened him of disclosing his misadventure to Rahim, he reacted with no sense of fear. In her case, it is he who gives the final blow to ruin her marital life with Rahim.

The author also gives a realistic picture of the women of the slum. Surrendering the body to a man in exchange of money is not a big thing for the women. They even do not hesitate to lure others to follow their way and this attitude gets reflected in Pasu's mother when she speaks to Julie – 'See that hotel over there? The manager says he'll give you twenty. If it's okay, I'll tell him today.' Again, when Rahim deserts, she remarks 'What God has done is for the better. With Julekha's kind of beauty she will be able to make heaps of money in a matter of days' (377). The prevailing atmosphere of the slum is such that here no one believes for a moment that there can exist a virtuous woman. Even Rahim fails to trust his wife and eventually leaves her to find her 'own path of employment' with an indication that he will come to her sometimes at his needs (374). This is the prevailing attitude of the men in the slum. They do not mind their women making some extra income to fill their bellies. It is because of that Dal

Bahadur does not have any feeling of heartache or a feeling of sexual jealousy to what his woman Lakshmi does for her survival. In their world the marital relationship in which man acts as the husband and woman as the wife is totally missing. There is a relationship between two people of which one is a man and other is a woman, not essential to be the wife who spend her lifetime with her husband.

When finally, Shankar reaches the rented house of Monimala, she expresses her new philosophy of life through the words 'Perhaps you had thought that we're going from street to street with begging bowls in our hands' to which he replies by telling his own experience of seeing two Sindhi refugee girls with a letter of appeal in their hands seeking donations from people and later one of them accompanying the manager of a hotel into his bedroom in 'broad daylight!'. Shankar speaks sarcastically that 'there has been progress in the occupation of begging too' (379).

As a realistic short story "Spring in Hell" touches upon another vital issue; it is the issue of immigration. Monimala along with her father and small brother, and Rahim immigrated at a time when there were waves of immigration from erstwhile East Bengal to Assam. It is a historical truth that in the period between the independence of India in 1947 and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 there was a massive influx of immigrants to Assam.

'After independence the affect of migration to Assam was the highest.

The rate of migration may be divided broadly into two parts, pre-1971 and post-1971. Post-1971 period refers to the trend of migration after the creation of Bangladesh. Large scale immigration did take place between 1951 and 1971 in the entire region' (Bhuyan 81).

The issue of immigration in the history of Assam, is one of the most complex issues. It is such an issue which eventually led to the students led anti-foreigner movement in Assam which started from mid-1979 'which rocked the state between 1979 and 1985' (Talukdar 110). The Movement had the singular objective of freeing the state from illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. There are so many writings from North East India which are thematically concerned with this issue of immigration. One such book is Mamang Dai's book, *Stupid Cupid*, which though primarily not based on any of the issues of the region, refers to Assam agitation of 1979 which was led by The All-Assam Students' Union (AASU) (Dai 13). In the Assam Movement, as a result of the conflict between the agitators and security forces, 855 people lost their lives. Moreover, group clashes rendered many households homeless. In a sense, it was a period of socio-political instability in the state. The anti-foreigner movement which lasted for six years saw a series of agitation programs with people on the streets, with their demand

'Assam for the Assamese' and all these programs paralyzed the normal life in Assam (Bezbaruah 240).

Class Conflict in "Spring in Hell"

A dominant characteristic of Borgohain's writing is the realistic portrayal of the class-based society in which one holds bulk of the resources and the other is left to reel under poverty. "Spring in Hell" very well picturises two worlds – one is the 'mysterious world' of the slum and the other is the world outside. The first one is a poverty-stricken world where people are forced by circumstances to adopt any means to fill their bellies, be it moral or immoral, humane or bestial. It is a world which exists underneath the 'gloss and glitter' of the culture and civilisation of towns and cities (381). It is a place where women have nothing like bodily shame or sense of propriety. It is such a world where the sanctity of man-woman relationship is out of place, man does not hesitate to abandon his wife for a simple cause and leave his wife to become a prostitute, the husband is unmindful of his wife's making some extra income by selling her body, a father does not hesitate to allow his son to pimp for a prostitute and 'a leper clutches her child to her breast and sleeps' (381). It is a homogenous society which is not swayed by any religious principle or any class distinction; all are poverty-stricken and hence the only thing important in their life is the battle for survival. Monimala's confession that she 'stood naked in front of many men, to eat a handful rice with salt and keep the blood flowing in my veins...' (380) gives an insight about this world. On the other hand, the second is the pluralistic world of the bourgeois and the rich where people need not strive for filling their bellies and where religion, ethics and human values are not out of place. It is a world in which compassionate people like Shankar lives. However, it is also the world which produces people like Niranjana and the hotel manager. The dichotomy between the two worlds and presence of pluralism in a society have very well been exposed by the author.

By unveiling the behind tales of Julie and Monimala along with the men and women around them and giving an impression about the very ambience of the slum, the author draws a realistic picture of human society. It is a society in which some are exploiters and some are exploited; some are predators and some are victims. While Julie, Monimala and their likes are exploited, there are people like Niranjana and the hotel manager who regard women as commodity. Further, it is poverty itself that is instrumental in indulging an honest man or woman into treading on the wrong path. Hence, the author neither rebukes, nor criticizes the doers of such acts on the ground that it is the circumstance that shapes a person's life. How circumstance moulds a person can be understood from Shankar's realisation that if he had a

secured job with sufficient money, he could have married Monimala, and again if he had married her and stayed in the slum there was every possibility of his being like Rahim, Dal Bahadur and the likes of them. To Shankar, it is better to survive than to perish. Hence, he speaks to Monimala,

‘The first and foremost thing in the world is to survive, stay alive. Had women had a vocational sphere as wide as men’s, had women been given an honour and freedom equal to that given to men instead of being regarded as mere reproductive machines, you, too surely would have been able to live a life of beauty and meaning. But it’s better to live on the fruits of your own labour than to commit suicide or to survive on one’s leftovers like a dog, Monimala’ (377).

Shankar realises that ‘love, sense of beauty, the awareness of morality – all these are fine things. But they have no value unless they are measured by the yardstick of everyday practicality’ (381). Monimala’s lamentation further accentuates it when she says that one can derive some self-esteem by throwing those twenty rupees in the face of the gentleman in the initial phase. But constant deprivations ultimately weaken the power of resistance and a day comes when she finds no option, but to surrender her body to these gentlemen. Shankar’s ire against the so-called religiosity gets reflected in the following words:

When these Monimalas groaned in pain under the crushing weight of some barbaric voluptuary, for the sake of a mere ten rupees or so, didn’t that groan silence at least one azan in a mosque in Pakistan? Had crores of people of a nation become the chosen children of God only through obtaining the right to sacrifice cows on Bakr Eid’ (378).

A host of issues that find expression in “Spring in Hell” can be explained in terms of the theory of alienation developed by a number of thinkers including Emile Durkheim, Erich Fromm, Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, Melvin Seeman, Kalekin-Fishman and Robert Ankony. According to Ankony, the theory of social alienation is a culmination of ‘a low degree of integration’ in a society or community and ‘a high degree of distance or isolation’ between ‘individuals or between an individual and a group of people’ (Ankony 120-134). According to sociologist Melvin Seeman, there are five features of social alienation. These are powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation and self- estrangement (Seeman). The very concept of slum bears its aloofness from the adjacent society. The slum in the present story is reflective of the social alienation in terms of all the social norms. All the inhabitants of the slum are poverty stricken and their struggle is for survival. Just as Rahim’s transforming

Julekha into a whore is guided by the norms of the slum, in the same way all other people of the slum are also guided by such norms which are totally different from those of a civil society. In a sense they are either alienated from the world outside, or they want to be self-estranged. It is poverty that places Rahim and Julie, and Monimala in that circumstance. Further, the social and moral values of the slum are in conflict with those of the civil or elite society. Monimala's becoming a whore, Joy's deviant behaviour, Rahim's deserting his wife, selling of illegal liquor by Dal Bahadur's wife, and the persons who have resorted to criminal trades can also be considered as a revenge against the socio-political and socio-economic system which has created inequality in the distribution of power and resources. The deviant behaviour as seen in the people like Joy is born out of one's desire to assert supremacy and hold power which arises from a sense of alienation and powerlessness. With the growth of urbanisation and impact of globalisation the number of slums has been increasing day by day implying the rising gap between the rich and the poor, and the urban and the rural.

Conclusion

"Spring in Hell" is the example of a short story which uses realism as a tool for bringing about social changes and to expose the class conflict. 'Social change' is basically a phrase which denotes the alteration of mechanisms within the social structure, characterized by changes in cultural symbols, rules of behaviour, social organizations, or value systems' (Form). The phrase, though basically related more to Sociology, it is no less significant so far as the basic aim of literature is concerned. The great novelists like Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens effectively used literature as a vehicle for reflecting, discussing, and focusing on contemporary social issues. By exposing the hypocrisy of the so-called gentry, deviance of the slum people and socio-political as well as socio-economic inequality, the author raises his voice to against the social system. The unembellished portrayal of the slum and its inhabitants, their hardships and dreams, the lost dreams of Julie and Monimala and their becoming prostitutes as well as changes in their bodies are the aspects which justify the author's choice for using social realism as an effective tool for unveiling the hidden truths behind the society. The greatness of the story lies in the fact that the author considers everyone as a human being irrespective of caste, class, religion and social standing. In dealing with the issues of 'submerged population groups' to address a dominant community what Frank O' Connor expounded as the criteria of a short story (Hansen), "Spring in Hell" is a perfect example in this regard. However, it may be a short story, but the thematic varieties and their greatness make it closer to a novel.

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