RETELLING OR REWRITING: READING "MOINAMATIR SACHA (SADHU) KOTHA"[1]

Written by **Dr Purabi Goswami**

Asst. Prof., Handique Girls' College, Guwahati, India

Abstarct

The paper offers a critical reading of an Assamese short story written by a woman writer in the year 2011. The story is a rewriting of a folktale known as "Champavati" entitled "Moinamatir Sacha (Sadhu) Kotha" written by Rashmi Rekha Bora. In the original story Champavati's stepsister who was compelled to follow the path of her sister, does not find any space or voice; but in the short story she is the narrator of her own life and experiences. It is an instance of a marginalised woman speaking her mind out and hence it provides a host of possibilities to read it from multiple perspectives of women's writing. The paper analyses the story as a retelling from 'her' perspective.

Key terms: Retelling, Representation, Identity, Women's Writing, Discourse, Closure.

MAIN TEXT

Language whether written or verbal has been a man's prerogative till recent times. Women are still struggling to find a proper place in this field. Women need to struggle because they are telling and writing within a tradition which is Patriarchal. In this context Virginia Woolf's explanation of the situation of the women who write make it more candid. In the essay "Women and Fiction" Woolf writes: "It is a sentence made by men; it is too loose [syntactically], too heavy [with the weight of formal conventions], too pompous [with its freight of male values and male power] for women's use" (48). A women cannot write in this language without bringing it into her shape. In other words, they require to create an alternative discourse. This discourse may not necessarily be opposed to the dominant patriarchal discourse but it must be able to accommodate the women's

language, concerns, rights and opportunities. As Annette Kuhn notes: "…feminine language… works against the very closure which, it is suggested, is a feature of dominant 'masculine' language, to the extent that such a language embodies a hierarchy of meanings and implies a subjection to, a completion and closure of meaning" (17). Hence, women's entry into language is not act of affiliation but an act of bifurcation[2].

In corollary to that woman is not able to identify herself with several happenings in human civilization. They cannot have faith in a linear progressive civilization nor in the unified subject of Humanism. As Nancy K. Miller puts it:" …the plots of women's literature are not about 'life' and solutions in any therapeutic sense…They are about plots of literature itself, about the constraints the maxim places on rendering a female life in fiction" (356). In this sense each piece of women's writing is a documentation of the trials and tribulations of the act of writing. The whole process of a woman's growing up is different from man because of the existing norms in our society based on gender. The symbolic order which Lacan designates based on Freud's psychoanalytical theories does not exist for woman. As a critic Joan Lidoff writes: "Nancy Chodorow's revision of Sigmund Freud's developmental theory suggests that girls, never separating themselves as definitively from their mothers as do boys, develop a more flexible sense of ego boundary" (16-17). Since then a woman cannot be restricted by rigid boundaries. The norms by which the ego of a male child are constructed cannot be applied to a female child. This conflict and fight of a woman with extremities begins and continues throughout her life. Hence a woman's identity always comes 'under erasure'. Of course the term identity itself is interpreted in different ways in the postmodern period. In the words of Stuart Hall: "Identity is such a concept— operating 'under erasure' in the interval between reversal and emergence; an idea which cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be at all" (16). The formation of this identity is always in relation to an 'other', something which the subject lacks. At the same time the very foundation of this formation is based on a construction. As Stuart Hall explains, "The unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity treats as foundational is not a natural, but a constructed form of closure, every identity naming as its necessary, even if silenced and unspoken other, that which it 'lacks'" (18). At this juncture when the foundation of that system is questioned the idea of women's identity becomes more fluid and the experimentation to discover herself continues.

In this act of reestablishment a woman writer needs to begin from the scratch. In every system Patriarchy was embedded whether it was history, social norms, folk-belief or folk-songs. For a woman to emerge within that tradition with an identity of her own is a challenging task. As example I am referring to Assamese folk-tales; however, the perspectives reflected by these folktales are not specific to Assam alone. As Praphulladatta Goswami explains after quoting the following proverb "'To dogs give no room, to women give no encouragement' the attitude that this proverb reveals prevails in many parts of the world. A similar line can be found in 16th century English 'A woman, a dog and a walnut tree, the more you beat them, the better they be'" (17). Not only the proverbs in the traditional folktales too the typical patriarchal attitudes get exhibited. The women in the folktales are either scheming stepmother, efficient homemaker, helpful beggar women or the victimised girl. The Assamese story of our discuusion "Moinamatir Sacha (Sadhu) Kotha" Which I have translated into English as "The Real (Folk) Tale of Moinamati" is a retelling of a folktale popularly known as "Champavati". Champavati's father had two wives and she is the daughter of his first wife. After marrying the second one who is young he loses interest in his first wife who is called 'elagi' meaning someone who is not needed and the second wife is called 'lagi', one who is needed. Once her father entrusted Champavati the duty of guarding his paddy field from the birds. When Champavati was singing to send off the birds one python entered replying to her song asserting that it will marry Champavati. Eventually her father marries her off to the python but to everyone's surprise she was not devoured by it rather she was found wearing precious jewels, ornaments and silk garments the next day of her wedding. Her stepmother became jealous and urged her husband to find out another python for her daughter. However, the next one happened to be a real python who ate up the other girl in the wedding night.

The Assamese women short story writers in the recent years address diverse subjects with multiple perspectives. In doing that they have selected unconventional subject matters which were not considered fit subjects of fictional literature thereby breaking new grounds. They were successful in raising their voices through the short stories addressing issues of female sexuality, gender disparity in the everyday space, women and nature, identity politics, women and language, construction and appropriation of myths and folktales etc. The story of our selection is a retelling of the folktale rather than being a reconstruction as it is told from the perspective of the younger

sister who is engulfed by the python according to the folktale. In this context we can mention a critic Mark Freeman who says stories are repository of conventions. He explains, "…the way we remember and the way we tell is suffused with conventions, with schematic even stereotypical, renditions of the personal past, derived from countless sources, many of which are external to one's own personal experiences" (265). A story teller in the act of story telling unconsciously speaks with a belongingness to that convention. Nevertheless, in this story the teller successfully breaks herself free from those conventions.

In the original story she is entirely hushed up. She neither has a voice nor a name. Hence she appears as a voice in this story; she does not have a physical appearance. She tells her story to another woman, her step sister, Champavati and transforms into a person of flesh and blood when she gives her a wooden tool to sit. The story develops through some binaries; for instance her elder sister Champavati belongs to the world of fairy tales, her python husband transforms into a prince and she lives an idealised life of love and happiness. Whereas she, the younger sister introduces herself as a person 'made with mud and soil' (247). It also hints at the polarities between fiction and reality as she repetitively tells "live happily ever after is possible only in tales" (247). The speaker's association with soil, paddy field and the exploited class also marks her as a spokesperson of the working class.

The teller focuses on her erased 'identity'. She tells her sister that she does not have a name as her mother, grandmother did not have and pleads her to give a name, "Give me a name which matches with you so that I can tell my real stories with my own name" (248). Story telling can create communities as Hakyoon Lee in the essay "Telling Stories and Making Social Relations: Transnational Women's Ways of Belonging in Intercultural Contexts" elaborates: "…participation in this new community is not limited to the members' status as participants, but instead constitutes a profound struggle to find or create new discursive spaces in which to construct or reconstruct social relations" (177). In the story too she collapses on the lap of her sister and Champavati gives her the name 'Moinamati' and entreats her to tell her story. Moinamati speaks out all her repressed feelings for being exploited: "You were decorated with all precious jewels and pearls, was that my fault? They sent me to the paddy field to ward off the birds like you, was that my fault sister? If

no one sang in reply to my song… If my song and my voice was lost in the void; was that my fault?" (248). She questions her sister why she was made a scapegoat because her mother was jealous of Champavati. In this way through her story she makes her voice heard.

Many instances in the narrative also differentiates between the two stories; one is written by Patriarchy where Champavati is the beautiful, loving and an ornamental object in the house of the prince and the other story which narrates the life of the sister who is forced to follow the footsteps of Champavati without her will. Noone was there to write her story as she narrates: "I had to write my own story wiping my tears…I became an instrument— to fulfil my mother's wishes" (249). Her story is 'her' story in the real sense. It is a story of woman not of Moinamati alone.

Later on when Moinamati identifies her elderly rich old husband who is a Mahajan[3] with a python, it turns into a representation of double exploitation because he exploits the poor as well as the women. This python eats up paddy fields, cows, lands and all other properties which a village man manages to gather. He is manipulative and takes the opportunity to marry young Moinamati by bribing her father that he will free him from all the debts. The narration continues in the following manner: "After getting up in the morning I found my body aching because of the embrace by the poisonous python. I found a large number of people around me who were engulfed by the python. Some were alive, some were half-alive and some were dead. I also remained with them half-dead, my elder sister" (251). That is why the story is about the marginalised and cannot be identified with privileged. In this context we can refer to A K Ramanujan's observation: "The father tongues distanced us from our mothers, from our childhoods, and from our villages and many of our neighbours in the cowherd colony next door. And the mother tongues united us with them" (241). He calls Tamil mother tongue and English father tongue[4]. It is the language of the woman who brings us closer to our fellow sufferers and enables us to form a bonding.

Along with all these the story is an engagement with women's writing because it is in opposition to the established Patriarchal writing as Montefiore asserts: "…this oppositional engagement, this struggle to transform inherited meanings, is where the real strength and specificity of women's poetry lies" (qtd in Kaplan, 1990: 345). The teller creates a language in which she can express herself in the following way, "In the dark prison of the python the dark nights devoured my own

self. I forgot what was I? What did I want? Whom did I love?" (253). In the lyrical narration of her life she was able to disclose the facts of her life which would have remained unarticulated.

The narrative also exhibits self-consciousness thereby revealing metafictional features because Moinamati tells her sister that she will come out of the dungeon of the python and will end her story. Focusing on the idea of constructiveness in any narration the story emphasises the distinction that reality cannot be ended at one's wish but fiction can be. The story ends with the following lines:

"Real (tales) do not get over

Our garments get tarnished with blood

We cannot come back

We cannot come back" (253)

In other words this also becomes the space which shows "woman's place within and without narrative works to undo various textual, conventional, and institutional boundaries" (Brewer:1158). The story also elucidates the woman's place within narration and without narration. Within narration we can find it at three levels: First is the Moinamati's representation in the traditional narrative, second is Champavati's representation in the folktale and the last one is her self-representation.

At the end we can refer to Mária Minich Brewer as she opines:

> *Rather one can say that this writing is both inter-discursive and trans-discursive in that it brings all discourses into communication with one another by carving out a space between them. Because women's writing has a significance in its effects and affects not accounted for by any one of these critical discourses, the question itself is displaced and reinscribed. Women's discourse has little to do with an ineffable or unnameable essence of Femininity. The form of the question, 'What is woman's discourse?', or 'What is feminine writing?', is in fact complicitous with narrative closure. The question presupposes that one necessarily ought to define the various spaces, scenes, and potentialities of that discourse in the form*

> *of a description in a constative (cognitive) mode. Displace this question instead to the*
> *varied practices of performative language that characterize much women's writing today,*
> *and you realize that it is precisely such an'enjoyment' of performativity that is being*
> *reaffirmed. These texts of women's writing thoroughly alter the way we write and interpret*
> *(and are interpreted by) the narratives of knowledge. They invent a writing that allows for*
> *the co-existence of narrative difference (1159).*

The story challenges the traditional, patriarchal discourse on women and creates a discourse which is 'trans-discursive' because it does not adhere and support the typical representation of women. We can also consider the element and techniques used for the narration. Champavati is awakened by a voice of the soil every night and one night she goes out and is welcomed by the voice of the night. The voice did not have a physical entity; only when Champavati gives her a name she transforms into a woman of flesh and blood. At the end of the story she again disappears. Hence the story takes a position between fantasy and reality which also makes it 'inter-discursive'. It opens the way for interpreting it as a subconscious thought in the mind of Champavati and raises the question was it a dream of Champavati? The scope for multiple interpretations in the story makes a definite closure impossible.

ENDNOTES

1. The Assamese word sadhu kotha can be translated into English as folktale. Folktales are imaginative and fantastical; but the writer prefaces it with a word 'sacha'. Sacha means what is real and true. The title hints at digging into the reality behind the fantastical representation of the women in the folktale.

2. I have used the word bifurcation to show the separate status of women's discourse. The whole line of argument of the women critics including Elaine Showalter, Helén Cixous, Julia Kristeva and many others stresses that.

3. Mahajan in Assamese is a rich man in a village who owns huge properties and lands. Normally he is an exploitative figure who takes advantage of the poverty of the village people.

4. A. K. Ramanujan resembles mother tongue with the language of emotion and father tongue with intellectualism.

Works Cited:

Bora, Rashmirekha. "Moinamatir Sacha (Sadhu) Kotha" in *Bacharar Galpa.* Ed. Soumir Yogi. Aakbaak: Guwahati, 2012.

Brewer, Maria Minich. "A Loosening of Tongues: From Narrative Economy to Women's Writing." *MLN* 99:5(1984):1141-1161. JSTOR. Web. 26 September, 2017.

Freeman, Mark. "Memory and Narrative" in *Memory Histories, Theories, Debates*. Eds. Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz. 265-277. JSTOR. Web. 6 September, 2020.

Goswami, Prafulladutta. *Essays on the Folklore and Culture of North-Eastern India*. Spectrum Publications: Guwahati: 1983.

Hall, Stuart. "Who needs 'identity'?" in *Identity: a reader.* Ed. Paul Du Gay, Jessica Evans and Peter Redman. Sage: New Delhi, 2000.

Kaplan, Carla."Women's Writing and Feminist Strategy." *American Literary History* 2. 2 (1990): 339-357. JSTOR. Web. 7 September, 2020.

Kuhn, Annette. *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*. London: Routledge, 1982.

Lee, Hakyoon. "Telling Stories and Making Social Relations:Transnational Women's Ways of Belonging in Intercultural Contexts." *Applied Linguistics* 36.2 (2015): 174–193. JSTOR. Web. 5 December, 2020.

Lidoff, Joan. "Tangled Vines: Mothers and Daughters in Women's Writing." *Women's Studies Quarterly* I

11.4 (1983):16-19. JSTOR. Web. 14 July, 2018.

Miller, Nancy K. "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction" in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory.* Ed. Elaine Showalter. New York: Pantheon, 1985.

Ramanujan, A. K. "Telling Tales." Daedalus 118.4 (1989): 238:261. JSTOR. Web. 2 September, 2020.

Woolf, Virginia. "Women and Fiction" in Women and Writing. Ed. Michelle Barrett. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979.