

Syed Abdul Malik and his novel-*Agrhari Atmar Kahini*: A Postcolonial study

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Abstract

Syed Abdul Malik, an eminent novelist, Short Story writer, Poet, Playwright, Philosopher in Assamese literature was born at a small village of Golaghat district in Assam in North-East India. He had great attachment with various regional and national literary organizations throughout his lifetime. He was selected as secretary of 'Assam Sahitya Sabha' in 1977. He was awarded 'Sahitya Akademi' Award in 1972, 'Padma Shree' in 1984, 'Padma Bhushan' in 1992, from the Govt. of India, 'Shankar Dev and Shahityachariya' awards in 1999, other numerous awards from different social and academic bodies in the country. He has about seventy novels, more than one thousand Short Stories, ten Research Works, three Travelogues, twenty three Dramas, two Biographies, one Lyric, three Humorous writings, four Autobiographies, four Poems, five books on Children Literature and ten Translation works in his credit. He is one of the foremost literary figures in the North-East India who left behind such a huge literary contributions in Assamese literature. Akademi Award winner novel "*Aghari Atmar Kahini*" is a subjective novel depicting social disintegration, cultural degeneration and also their impact upon individual and society especially in the postcolonial era in our country particularly in Assam.

Key words: Assamese, culture, literature, colonialism, novels, psychology

Brief life sketch of Malik:

Syed Abdul Malik was a renowned Assamese writer who was born on January 14, 1919 in a Naharani of Golaghat district in Assam. He is best known for his immortal short stories, novels, dramas and poems. Malik is regarded as one of the foremost writers of Assamese literature.

Malik started his schooling from Naharani L. P. School. Then he continued his studies in a number of schools including Dergaon and Jorhat Govt. High Schools in Assam. In 1937, completed his Matriculation and then I.A. from Jorhat College in 1939. He achieved B.A. Degree with Honours in English from Cotton College, Guwahati in 1941. He also completed M.A. in Assamese Language from the University of Calcutta in 1951.

The professional life of Syed Abdul Malik was interesting and eventful. He started his career as an Assistant Inspector of Excise in 1942. Next year, he switched to the Army as a Civilian Censor. Afterwards in 1946, he entered the teaching profession and joined Jorhat College as a lecturer of Persian language. During 1948-49, Malik also worked as a Programme Assistant in the Shillong-Guwahati Radio station. In 1951, he joined Jagannath Baruah College in Jorhat as a lecturer in Assamese Language. Malik remained in the same position till his retirement in 1976.

Malik started writing in his school days. He enriched Assamese literature with many novels, short stories and other literary works. The writings of Malik reflected humanity, Assam history, Assamese society and events of that period. His mastery over Assamese

language, history and culture was incomparable. In 1972, Malik got *Sahitya Akademi* Award for his novel “*Aghari Atmar Kahini*” (The tale of nomadic soul).

Amongst his remarkable novels: *Chabi Ghar* (1958), *Surujmukhir Swapna* (1960), *Adharsila* (1960), *Anya Akash Anya Tara* (1962), *Aghari Atmar Kahini* (1969), *Amar Maya* (1970), *Agnigarbha* (1971), *Dokmokali* (1972), *Sonali Sutare Bandha* (1972) and so on.

From his notable Short Stories include: *Parasmoni* (1946), *Maram Maram Lage* (1961), *Sikhare Sikhare* (1963), *Andhakup* (1977), *Bibhatsa Bedana* (1978), *Mriganabhi* (1989), *Arihana* (1996) etc.

Syed Abdul Malik’s awards and achievements which he was adorned with from different academic and government bodies which can be highlighted as: *Sahitya Akademi* Award in 1972, East India Literary and Cultural Award by the Govt. India in 1981, *Padma Shri* Award by the Govt. of India in 1984, Degree of Doctor of Literature from Dibrugarh University, Assam in 1988, *Padma Bhushan* and All India Harmony Award from the Govt. of India in 1992, Assam Express Award in 1993, Assam Valley Literary Award and *Mukta Kantha* Awards in 1994, *Azan Fakir* Award in 1995, Moolight Media Award in 1996 and *Srimanta Shankar Deva* Award and *Sahityacharyya* by Assam *Sahitya Sabha* in 1999. Syed Abdul Malik passed away on 20 December, 2000.

Main discussion:

Sayed Abdul Malik, a most popular novelist of Assamese literature who has about seventy novels more than one thousand short stories to his credit. *Akademi* Award winner novel “*Aghari Atmar Kahini (1969)*” is a subjective novel depicting social disintegration, cultural degeneration and also their impact upon individual. Here it has been aimed at illustrating the postcolonial experience of the nation in general, and that of Assam in particular, that exists “within”, rather in another sense of the term: that it exists within the individual psyche, where it influences our personal identity and our perceptions of others. The text, has been consulted ‘*Sayed Abdul Malik Rachawali*’, (volum-5, ed. *Lutfor Rahman, Kasturi Prakashan, 2001* in Assamese). More specifically, the novel reveals the colonialist ideology hiding at the heart of Assamese Culture by revealing the colonialist psychology that lurks at the core of Assamese cultural identity. Colonialism consists of, among other things, those unconscious attitudes and behaviour by which a cultural group *others* a culturally subordinate group, by which the culturally privileged ones distance themselves emotionally from populations over whom they want to gain or maintain control. There are many political and economic motives for *othering*, but primary psychological motive seems to be the need to feel powerful, in control and superior. Colonialist psychology finds in the insecure individual a fertile ground on which it establishes itself. This psychology is self-perpetuating which encourages the personal insecurity that facilitates its operations. As *othering* is the activity that both fuels and expresses colonial psychology, it depends heavily on racism and classism: the two very successful forms of *othering*. Sexism overlaps these two forms subjecting women from culturally subordinate groups to complex forms of multiple *othering*. It is the multiple form of *othering* that distinguishes colonialist psychology.

The novel *Aghari Atmar Kahani* is the expressive of the most distinguishing features of post colonialism. The *Atmas* (Souls) here are feeling *unhomely*, though they live at their homes. The hero, *Shashanka* replies to the question about where he lives: “*In the entire*

Assam,(p. 659, trans.)” He further says ; “We are all unhomely (Aghari) Niranjan, you, me...(p.757, trans.)” . The three characters, namely, *Shashanka*, *Niranjan* and *Apara* are caught between cultures, the one ideal and the other real, one they long for and the other they inherit. They belong to neither entirely, but to both partially, finding themselves arrested in a psychological limbo that results not merely from some individual psychological disorder but from the trauma of the cultural displacement from the original (*Pre-colonial / ideal*) to the postcolonial (*the postcolonial / adopted*), the *unhomeliness*. In this context, to be *unhomed* is not to be *homeless* but to feel not at home even in one’s own home or in oneself. The cultural *identity-crisis* has made them psychological refugees within their own land i.e. Assam, as a result of the decolonization of their nation (India). This dilemma is due to face the rejection of colonialist ideology, which defines them as inferior and also the reclamation of their pre-colonial past. The novelist himself has faced the problem of a complex task of writing the novel. The use of the native language has required the double effort of writing in Assamese and using the terms and quotations from other languages like *English*, *Sanskrit* and *Bengali* for the sake of intelligibility, force and authenticity and also to overcome the problem of non-availability of equivalent terms and expressions. *Shashanka*, the hero of the novel, frequently uses English terms and phrases in his speech throughout the novel. He refers to the authors like *Shakespeare* and *Barnard Shaw* and also quotes from *Thomas More (The Light of Other Days)*:

“Oft in a stilly night
E’re Slumber’s chain has bound me
Fond memory bring the light
Of other days around me”

(p.685 trans.)

British came to India, ruled over the people and left the country as well as their culture, literature, language etc. which we cannot despise of so easily. These have resulted into forming our double-consciousness. Naturally, *Shashanka* refers to English authors as he refers to *Rabindranath* and his poems and songs, uses English terms as naturally as Bengali and Sanskrit terms. So do other characters.

The problem that complicates the desire to reclaim a pre-colonial past is that it is not always easy to discover that past. It has been lost over many generations of colonial domination. Moreover, ancient Indian culture has changed by now, changed by cross-cultural contact and through military invasions. The postcolonial identity of Indian is necessarily a dynamic one, constantly evolving i.e. it is “*hybrid*” in nature. The characters of the novel, specially the three characters, display this *hybridity* in various contexts. This ‘hybridity’ or ‘syncretism’ consists of a productive, exciting positive force in a shrinking world that is itself becoming more and more culturally hybrid. This encourages us to embrace the multiple and oft in conflicting aspect of the blended culture which is ours and which is an indelible fact of history. For instance, when, *Kanak*, a minor character of the novel says that the social exposure of *Apara* (the wife) is more than that of *Riranjan* (the husband), “it brings in pride to the eyes of *Apara*, Curiosity to the eyes of *Shashanka* and displeasure and irritation to *Niranjan* (p.661, trans.)” This happens because it goes against the traditional patriarchal notion of Indian culture regarding the female behaviour. But it is none of the wonders in Indian or Assamese society today.

The strategy of *othering* and *self-othering* have been successfully used by Malik in this novel that play an important role in a colonial discourse and dehumanize people. These permit one to identify oneself as the human being and people who are different as other than human. *Othering*, thus, facilitates demonization of people, defines as different from us. *Shashanka*, the hero of “*Aghari Atmar Kahani*” others his own father as “*a person who was a minister consecutively for several terms, an intelligent man, earned vast wealth during his Ministerial period bought three tea gardens, purchased share for lacs and much lands, mutated govt. land in his own name, married twice*, (p.664, trans.). Or he others *Mriganka*, his elder brother as “*one who was busy in cinema, singing and dancing. He is handsome, sings well, read commerce but did not pass. He was more busy in singing and dancing than reading. He ill-spent much of the paternal property, destroyed the lives of a number of girls*, (p.691, trans.)” *Self-othering* is more painful than *othering*, because it does not result in an escape or release but only in the attempt itself, in its exposition of insecurity. *Shashanka* others himself when he says:

“*I don’t want to be what my father is, I don’t want to be identified by my father’s identity. I want an identity of my own*, (p.702, trans.)” But the reality is that he cannot change his blood, his origin and upbringing. This is a sort of self-criticism which is in *Nirajan’s* language, “*an agonizing pleasure*”, and in his own language, “*a pleasant agony*”, (p.701, trans.)”.

Another Colonial impact on colonized subjects is “*mimicry*”, because none will engage in mimicry if he/she does not feel *unhomed*. It is an attempt to find a home, psychologically, by finding a culture to which one can feel one belongs. But the conviction of one’s own inferiority or “*bad blood*” or “*otherness*” that produces mimicry also which requires one to seek that home in a culture one deems superior to oneself. In other words, mimicry is an attempt to belong, that is doomed to failure, because even if one succeeds in adopting the “*superior*” culture, one’s feelings of inferiority will ensure that one is never at home in it. In “*Aghari Atmar Kahini*”, *Aparajita*, the heroine of the novel, becomes a victim of this mimicry and destroys herself. The main cause of her inferiority is her physical deformity i.e. her blindness of one eye, and side by side, the seductive agenda of *Mriganka*. Though poor, *Apara* is beautiful and wanted to rise in social ladder by becoming an artist of *Bombay Cinema*, and fell a prey to the carnal desire of *Mriganka*, becomes pregnant, then easily got aborted with a hope that *Mriganka* will marry her. She does not know that she is longing for what she does not belong. Her ultimate realization is the heart -rending cry of a fallen soul:

“*My Mother was a concubine of the father (father of Mriganka), and I am the concubine of the son (Mriganka),! How loathsome! How nasty! How unforgivable sin! How terrifying animality! What purgation am I undergoing? Of my poverty? of my beauty vanity, my unattainable hope or my foolishness?...*(p.772, trans.)”.

Mriganka is clearly the most privileged character in the novel and the apparent beneficiary of it. Despite his lack of personal refinement, and his inhuman character, he has all the cultural advantages afforded by the social hierarchy, class, gender, family and economic affluence, which are not justified but generally happens in a country like ours. Here patriarchal subjugation of women is analogous to colonial subjugation of indigenous populations. The resultant devaluation of women, and colonized peoples poses very similar problem for both the groups in terms of achieving and independent personal and group -

identity, gaining access to political power and economic opportunities, finding ways to think, speak and create that are not dominated by the ideology of the oppressor. These parallels between feminist and postcolonial concerns also underscore the *double-oppression* suffered by the postcolonial women like *Apara* in “*Aghari Atmar Kahani*”. *Apara* is a victim of an ideology which devalues her because of her class and patriarchal ideology and her sex. More unfortunately, she has suffered patriarchal oppression not in the hands of the colonialists but within her own patriarchal culture.

Malik has created an artificial “*diaspora*” in the house of *Shadananda Joshi*, a retired worker of *Sealdah Railway Station*. The income of this Marathi family is very limited. *Mr. Joshi* works in a business firm, *Mrs. Joshi* teaches in a tailoring and embroidery school. *Saya*, their adopted daughter reads in an Arts college and *Shashanka*, the hero of the novel (an Assamese) is a paying guest in the family. There developed the love-affair of *Saya* and *Shashanka* which proved unsuccessful because of the adamant decision of *Shadananda Joshi* that whoever marries *Saya* will have to reside in his home. This, *Shashanka* believes to be a blow to his self-respect, his patriarchal self. *Saya* has been suffering from “*identity-crisis*”. Her birth and parenthood is unknown. She had been picked up from the side of a road in *Manipur* by an old lady who died of cholera in a refugee camp of the *Burmese* during 1941-42. Then, after the death of the lady, the *Joshi* family adopted her as their daughter. This psychological trauma resulted into the suicide of *Saya*. *Saya* told *Shashanka*:

“There is none in this world as unfortunate as me. I do not know who were my parents, whether alive or dead. I do not know my race, religion, language and my country. I know nothing. None knows this except God. You won’t understand the agony of this crisis of identity, (p.739, trans.)” *Saya*’s crisis is severer than the *unhomeliness* of *Shashanka*, *Niranjan* and *Apara* that generates a sense of insecurity in a traditional morality-based Indian society. It brings in the sense of unworthiness and meaninglessness of life where an individual appears to be unwanted, unholy and alien, really, a tragic existence. This creates Lacanian reversal of Cartesian ‘*cogito*’: “*I think where I am not, therefore, I am where I do not think.*”

A moment comes in history when the soul of a nation, long suppressed finds utterance. *Shashanka* laments the gradual loss of fit leaders in politics in India during the postcolonial period i.e. after independence. During British rule politics attracted the intellectuals like “*Lajpat Ray, Tilak, Bipin Chandra, Gokhley, Ansari, Shubhas, Azad, Panth*” in national level, and *Tarun Phukan, Nabin Bordoloi, Kuladhar Chaliha* in regional level. *It is not to be found elsewhere in the world except in India that to be patriotic is to be politician. Politics is science, it is not a short, (p-703, trans.)*” Under present-day context, postcolonial condition has psychologically claimed the colonizer and the colonized, and has “molded their characters and dictated their directions. The situation is the situation of “*hate and desire*”, an implacable enmity between the native, and the invaders that scavenges the colonial past.

Conclusion:

To conclude, we might say that the battle-line between the native and the invader are also replicated within and the crisis produced by this self-division is at least psychologically significant. There is pathos in *Shashanka*’s excessive *Anglophilia*, *Apara*’s obsessive interest in social work and *Niranjan*’s unflinching adherence to self-sacrifice. In this novel, the logic of ‘*power*’ is depicted as ‘*coercive*’ and the campaign of power is ‘*seductive*’ through a variety

of baffling self-representations and confessions. It is a qualitative difference or gap between those who have it and those who suffer it, designating an imaginative space that can be occupied, a cultural model that might be imitated and replicated. Power is available in the form of 'subjection' as well as a procedure which is 'subjectivised' through and within particular individual. This may be illustrated with the help of the expression of *Shashanka* explaining his father's technique in regard of obtaining votes:

"Father sits near the table. Takes out the cheque book from the drawer and the fountain pen from his pocket, writes a cheque for Rs. one lac and then goes to the bank by his car. Then comes back and remains sitting at home. Like the "tuni" of the tale, taking grains from the granary of the king, the agents come. Place their hands, father throws on a bundle of notes, then, in a certain day the election is held, then, the counting of votes, at that time father visits the house of one of his friends. Father does not even smile after getting the result (pp.747-48, trans.)"

Thus, Foucault rightly said that there is no outside to power, it is always, everywhere. So also colonialism, a strategy of exercising power (the self) over the underprivileged (the other) modern colonialism is not just a historical illustration of Foucault's paradigmatic analysis, it is more significantly, a sort of crucial historical juncture at which power changes its style and begins to elaborate the strategies of profusion. It is not physical conquest of territories, rather more insidious in its commitment to the conquest and occupation of minds, selves and culture. It was pioneered by rationalists, modernists and liberals who argued that imperialism was really the messianic harbinger of civilization to the uncivilized world. Nandy says in his *"The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism, (1983)"*:

"The colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within colonized society to after their cultural priorities once and for all. In the process, it helps to generalise the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside, in structures and in minds."

Human beings acquire identity or self-consciousness only through the recognition of *others*, hence, there arises a situation where one is merely recognized which the other recognizes: for what I am, is recognition of man as such, and therefore, something that in principle should be extended to all i.e. each self has before it another self in and through which it secures its identity: *"I am possessed by the others, the other's look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculpts it, it produces it as it is, sees it as I shall never see it. The other holds a secret of what I am."* It is crucial for us to take seriously the idea of a psychological resistance to colonialism's civilizing mission. We need to exhume, historically, those defenses of mind which helped to turn the West *"into a reasonably manageable vector."* In this regard, it is worth-recalling of the revolutionary pronouncement made by the slave figure in Sartre's *"Being and Nothingness"*: *"I lay claim to this being which I am, that is, I which to recover it; or more exactly, I am the project of my being"*. What happens in Sayed Abdul Malik's *"Aghari Atmar Kahini"* may be said to be exactly this. The world of the novel is a world of utter failure. The world of *Manmath Chaudhuary* and *Mriganka* is a world of moral failure, of *Shashanka*, *Niranjan* and *Apara* are worlds of ideological failure, a world of depression, anxiety and agony. *Saya's* world is cloudy and obscure, a nebulous space where she lost herself. The inhabitants of this multi-dimensional

world and the characters are helpless to help themselves. They cannot build an India or an Assam of their own choice. As such, *Shashanka, Niranjan and Aparajita* are trying their best to build a liberal Assam where they all can breathe freely. The Assam they have may not be a pretty Assam, but that is the only Assam they have. They need to see it exists and may provide them a self-discovery of postcolonial experiences-“*a delight in defeat*”.

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