

The Grammar of Desire: Of Restraints and Controls

Snigdha Bhaswati¹

Abstract

Human bodies have been the primary sites of control, restricted by norms and traditions in order to keep the brahmanical, patriarchal societal order functioning smoothly. The essay here is an attempt at getting a glimpse of lives of a few women in 19th and 20th century Assam- the protagonists of certain selected works of Assamese literature. The idea is to analyze the tales that these literary masterpieces spin and locate the trajectory of lives of the women therein. Puberty, marriage and widowhood have been used as the three main tropes providing vantage points to view the ways in which the lives of these female protagonists have been directed here and the idea is to get a very broad picture of how female sexuality and sexual desires are kept under strict control lest they dare challenge the prevalent hierarchies of the society.

Introduction

With changing times the ways in which certain concepts had been perceived in the past have underwent major transformations keeping in sync with the present necessities and lifestyles. ‘Love’ and ‘desire’ remain two such terms, the conventional notions of which have been contested in the contemporary times in more than one ways; however, these still remain limited and for a large majority of the population in most places, there are undeniable continuities in the ways in which these are comprehended. Over time, across spaces, the human body has been controlled in myriad ways by the frameworks that the society manufactures to retain its order. Engels provides deep insights into how societies have made their journeys from a state of group marriage to that of monogamy- something that he understands as the struggle between the sexes and the final subjugation of the females by the males, that which was unknown in the previous periods of history (Engels,1985)- in a bid to determine the patrimony of the children which was not possible until the body of the female was restricted to a single male².

In this essay, our aim will be to look at the tropes of puberty, marriage and

¹ Snigdha Bhaswati (snigdha7.sb@gmail.com) pursuing masters in History, Ambedkar University, New Delhi.

² Engels explains in details how the structures of families change over time and how property relations become a major determinant in the process (Engels 1985, 18-44).

widowhood (the landmark stages in the life of a woman pointing at the conceived beginning, peak and demise of desire) and how at each phase the society attempts to box the female body with the grammar of desire that it drafts, elucidating its acceptable expressions and restraints.

History is omnipresent; it can be found wherever one can look for it. As sources, this essay primarily makes use of works of Assamese literature and at places a few folk songs of the state echoing the voices that are otherwise not heard of in the several bulky volumes of the canons of historical accounts. The view that they present is not from the apex but from the roots, forming the other half of the story. Under consideration are a few such works- '*Ayanaanta*' (Kalita, 1998)', '*Swarnalata*' (Misra 1991), '*Makam*' (Chaudhury 2011), '*Pass Chotalar Kathakata*' (Kalita, 2000) and '*Mrigonabhi*' (Kalita, 1996)³. What we aim to draw out of these works is a picture of the 19th and 20th century woman in Assam and how her desires were dictated by the syntax of society. However, it becomes extremely necessary here to add a disclaimer that in no way does the essay claim to represent the life of 'the Assamese Woman', which in itself is a non-existent homogenous category devoid of the many differences of class, caste and tribes that constitute the social fabric of the region. It only traces the lives of the female protagonists of these literary master pieces- which at best attempt to put across a basic idea of the living realities of a certain section of the caste Hindu women. To aid this effort we will also take up the case of a few folk songs of the state and hear what the woman had to say about her own life. Through these we will look at instances of how women have expressed their desires and how the filters of puberty, marriage and widowhood formed the pointers to a prescribed societal grammar, outside of which the language of desire was and still is seen as flawed and invalid.

Puberty: The Inception of Vice

The first signal for a civilized society that one of its constituent second class members- women- has become capable of desire is when she attains puberty. This becomes the turning point in the lives of many girls in the country whose bodies now become the primary site of control for the family; her newly raging hormones have to be kept in check lest these tempt her to step out of her boundaries of chastity. *Swarnalata*, set in the 19th century, placed utmost importance on the notion of pre puberty marriage. Even while the girl was supposed to remain at her paternal house until she attained puberty, she was supposed to be married off before; this was a way of ensuring that when she became ripe, the fruits of her young, slowly

³Unlike the other works, the story line and central characters of '*Swarnalata*' are not fictitious. It is set primarily in Nagaon, a small town in Assam and the story unfolds in the house of the eminent Gunabhiram Barua (father of *Swarnalata*- the protagonist). Gunabhiram Barua was one of the few Assamese high ranking civil servants who was posted in Nagaon in the capacity of 'Extra Assistant Commissioner'. Gunabhiram Barua had close association with the Brahmo Samaj and he was a pioneer of the causes of widow remarriage and women's education.

maturing body were consumed first and only by the husband and none else. The novel talks about how the nine year old Lakshmi, daughter of Swarna's teacher - a devout Brahmin, had her education at halt when she was wedded to a man she had never seen before. Swarna's father, owing to his association with the Brahmo Samaj was however strongly opposed to child marriage and was of the opinion that it was important for both the man and the woman to be physically and emotionally mature at the time of marriage, the larger the age gap between the husband and the wife, the lesser would be the intimacy of their relation. As we move to *Ayananta*, set in 20th century Assam we see that the insistence on pre puberty marriage dampens, nevertheless the significance of attainment of puberty remains immense. The attainment of puberty for a girl was, and still is, a celebrated event in Assam. In times of pre puberty marriage, of course, it marked the girl's eligibility to move to her husband's house, and eventually, as marriage became a post puberty affair, it became an event signifying the daughter's matrimonial and reproductive eligibility. On the surface, it sounds liberating, unlike in most other parts of the country a girl's menstruation is celebrated and looked upon as an occasion of happiness here, but on the core, things tend to be quite the opposite. The celebrations essentially consisted of a paraphernalia of brutal rituals for the girl, most of which are still observed. *Pass Chotalar Kathakata*, has a brilliant description of the same. She is kept in solitary confinement and is not allowed to meet or see any male member of the house; she is allowed just one proper meal a day, only before sunset and this may continue from around seven days to as long as three months. It is now when a girl's fortune is glanced into and depending on what is predicted, different rituals are observed. The promise of a happy married life is the desired prediction, while prophecies of widowhood or prostitution are feared and various ways are then adopted to please the gods to change the future prospects; all of the above mentioned predictions are based on the date and time of her attainment of puberty. She is conditioned to believe that the prime goal of her life is to be married and give birth, what more is anyway the cause of a woman's existence?

The celebration of a girl's first cycle of periods is hence a festive beginning of a lifelong process of confinement, of the first rules of the grammar of desire- that which was only legitimate if used for procreation with the husband (Mathur 2008, 55). The superstitions attached to it demonstrate how the husband's long and healthy life was assumed to be associated with the control over the woman's body; the greater the control, the longer and happier the husband's life. The process of isolating women during menarche moreover does not stop with the rituals observed the first time and carries on until menopause. It is hence also important to note how ideas of pollution are strongly attached to menstruating women, and how their seclusion for a certain number of days each month also becomes a way of constantly designating the status of impurity and inferiority upon them (Das,2008).

Marriage: The Ideal World

The case of Jeuti in *Ayanaanta* is an interesting story in itself, something which might have now changed noticeably. Jeuti, who had committed the grave sin of acting in a motion picture, was to face drastic and cruel consequences for her actions. She was forced to live in isolation with an imposition of ill repute, assigned a particular corner in the banks of the river to fetch water from or bathe in, away from the reach of the other women of the village on whom she would have had a 'bad' influence. She was seen as someone who dared to stage her body in public, who could therefore motivate other women to freely acknowledge their bodies, which were the sites of desire and which then had the potential to taint the honor of their families. Jeuti was hence to be kept aloof. The same Jeuti however, became a figure of reverence and beauty when she was finally married off to an affectionate lawyer who sympathized with her situation. This presents a classic example of how the position and perception of the woman in the society was determined by her marriage, implying that her desires were now tamed and under control, an assurance for the smooth functioning of patriarchy.

The burden of keeping a 'marriageable' girl in the house was immense; her youthful, tender body made her vulnerable and she herself could not be trusted with the safe guarding of her chastity. She was seen to be full of desires which if not streamlined through marriage, could prove to be dangerous for the honor and name of the family. The fact that a young girl could wish to set out in a pursuit of pleasure for her body was unacceptable and had to be avoided at all costs. Marriage, the other major trope in the grammar book of desire, had to be arranged by the family. In *Ayananta*, we see the haste in which the protagonist Bina's wedding was finalized post her growing intimacy with a young Christian boy. Bina was married to a man with character polar opposite and life thereafter changed for her losing its charms and vigor. Another instance depicted in the same novel is that of one of Bina's neighbours- Ruma, who too was married off to a man she never liked after her affair with a young revolutionary from the village. The girl lost her sanity post the wedding as she could never accept her husband as her partner. Ruma was denied medical treatment by the family, by her own father, and spent the rest of her life being a complete imbecile who was unaware even of the birth of her own daughter. She was chained and locked in a shed where she slept, excreted, and ate what could be supplied secretly by her mother. Her daughter who was born in that very shed was also not acknowledged by the family and was ultimately looked after by Bina and her grandmother. The honor and dignity of the family came over and above anything else. Love and desire were dangerous and no stones could be left unturned in the efforts to prevent these. Conjugal life was an imposition. This is made further clear in *Mrigonabhi*, set in the late 20th century, where the bright young protagonist Sontara was required to marry a man she developed immense dislike for. When she goes and complains to her

mother about an incidence where her fiancé had kissed her by force and that she did not wish to marry him, the latter only reiterated how the female body was meant for the consumption of the males and that it was an unavoidable reality. The woman was supposed to be the sponge to soak in the untamed desires of the man while refraining herself from taking agency over her own life. Marriage was the only niche where desire was approved for the woman, and if need be, she had to manufacture it in order to sustain the relationship with her husband. For the man, of course, heterosexual desire came as a package deal with masculinity. We see through these stories how the women tried to resist the course of events that unfolded in their lives only to be suppressed further, be the case of Sontara who approached her mother for help or Ruma who denied accepting the man she was married to physically and emotionally even at the cost of her own sanity.

Many folk songs from the state echo the cries of the wives whose marriages were unsatisfactory and who then blamed their parents for having married them off to husbands who were extremely poor or were addicted to opium, which again was a rampant practice.

*“O Aai kene biya dila baape
Morilu Morilu Somulai morilu
Jotiya bhangurar taape.
Aaither ghorote jau moi Bhangura,
Taate he emuthi pau
Kartik , Ganapati
Duguti sampatti
Taako moi logote niu”*

This is one such song where the woman wails on her misfortune and talks of her opium addict husband. She says she must go to her mother's, for it is only there she will get something to fill her stomach with and she must also take her only wealth, the two sons along. The women, oppressed and subjugated by the conditions of the society found in these songs an outlet for their frustrations; through these they sang their dissent and registered their protests.

In parts of lower Assam the custom of bride price prevailed for some time in the course of history before it fizzled away¹. The roots of the practice must have been associated with the daughter being an important productive force in the family. For the father, marrying her off meant losing a hand at work, hence the

¹The reason why the custom of bride price came to be opposed later must have been because it was a practice that had more adverse affect on the groom's family and not the bride's. Since the trouble had to be incurred by the boys and their kin. However, as a reversal of bride price, dowry became a common practice in the state.

groom was asked to compensate for the loss² (Randeria and Visaria,1984). This was before dowry became the vogue and practice, and a folk song in Goalpara (a district in Assam) perhaps is the most moving description of the plight of the women literally ‘sold’ in marriage.

*“Mon mor kande rey
Raati nisha ore kande
Ninder aalishe poti mok
Maa buliya daake
Mon mor kaande rey
Baapo kaana maa o kaana
O daroon o bidhi kaana parar log
Poicha r lobhe
Bechiya khaiche
Shwami nabalok
Mon mor kande rey*

*Koya den mor doya’r baba ko
O kaga ok dudho pathiyare diben
Shei na dudho khaya
Kaga mor poti manush hoiben
Mon mor kandey re”*

The woman grieves and wails in the darkness of the night as her husband, in his sleep calls her ‘Maa’. She blames her parents and even her neighbors and calls them blind, for having sold her to a groom who was still a child, and hence a lot younger to her. In the last stanza the unfortunate wife requests her father to send her some milk, consuming which her husband would become a ‘man’. This demonstrates the agony of a woman whose marriage fails to meet her expectations and her desires hence remain unquenched. This is again an example of how the patriarchal societal set up directly controlled the body and needs of the women.

A sharp contrast here is presented in *Makam*. Unlike the severe, demanding, apparent ‘civilized’ society, the tea tribes which were basically amalgamations of people from different places, from China to areas in and around present day Bihar and Jharkhand, appeared to be more liberal when it came to their social customs. Marriage there was a matter of companionship and affection between the bride and the groom, a decision that they took for themselves. When a Chinese bonded labor married an Indian widow the entire tea laborers’ community celebrated in

²This is a broad understanding of the practice drawn from the classical African experience where it was rampant, and it has been pointed out by scholars that the same logic might not be applicable to all instances of bride price.

heartfelt glee unlike in the caste Hindu societies around, where it would be an act of criminal proportions and would lead to banishment of the couple. The workers whose lives in the tea gardens were only marginally different from slaves, found solace in marriage, and which was more a matter of emotions than norms. Besides, in a setting where everyone was uprooted from their native soils being indentured labors, with hardly any tradition to hold on to, the tea laborers devised their own merriment. It was not considered essential for girls to be married at an age where they could scarcely comprehend the essence of the bond, instead mature adults made their own decisions when they deemed best. The structuring of the grammar of desire was different owing to the unique circumstances therein.

One can see a similar celebration of desire during the festivities of Bihu, which essentially is an agricultural festival revolving around the seasons of sowing, growing and harvesting of paddy. Scholars opine that behind these festivals the key idea was the production of crops and children, the latter being essential for the former and the former for the sustenance of life- *“dancing girl of the open field is the personification of the spring earth. The dancing boy represents the monsoon-cloud mad for union with the virgin earth. As an expression of their (cloud and earth) union, rains come down. The womb of the earth is fertilized with the seed of production. Procreation results. The boys and girls of the Bihu-field give symbolic expression to this biological aspect of nature’s existence. The posture of Bihu dances, particularly of the waist-line of the boys, indicates sex-approaches. The vibrations created on the nerves by the music of the drums, buffalo-horns and Bihu songs intensify the emotional reactions of the youthful boys and girls. Thus in the Bihu dance-arena often life’s partners are found. For a dancing girl to run away with a dancing boy is a common experience of the Bihu-field”* (Barua,1973). The following is a stanza of one of such songs to be sung by the girl

*Amona dhanoke daboloi goisilu
Bauli Botahe Paale,
Kaasi doli mari Habite xumalo
Uthote Borole Khale*

The girl here is describing how she had gone to the fields to harvest the paddy and was met by the stormy winds, an indication to her lover; she dropped her sickle and entered the forest for her lips to be stung by the bee which again, as is clear, is another euphemism here. On another instance, the boy sings-

*Poka tul tul bilahi oi
Pasi bhorai dila hi oi
Gote gote gilabor mon*

Here, the boy is referring to the bosoms of the girl using the metaphor of robust, ripe tomatoes that she offered to him and which he wants to savor immediately.

There was an unabashed admission of desire and lust here, set against a typical agrarian setting, often used as prop in the expression of their emotions. However with the coming of colonialism and the changing perceptions of the newly emerging Assamese elite by the second half of the 19th century, the festival came to be increasingly looked upon as a vulgar practice with its suggestive dance moves and lyrics. It was only post independence that it assumed the status of a cultural symbol of the state enthusing nationalism. By then as the demands for population growth reduced, owing to declining mortality rates, better health facilities etc. the festival ceased performing its earlier function of being a signifier of fertility and went on to be carried out as a matter of tradition (Barua,2009). With these changing circumstances and sensibilities, the lyrics of the Bihu songs and also the dance steps to a great extent came to be sanitized in order to make it as suitable as possible to the societal expectations while still retaining the element of romance. Once again, the rules of grammar shaped the open celebration of desire to fit into the framework of marriage, honor and patriarchy.

Widowhood: The Termination of Life

After her marriage, the woman becomes a necessary agent for reproduction and the unpaid servant of the household. However, the ideal wife's status would drop down suddenly from a home maker to a lumber too heavy to bear in case of her husband's demise. Widowhood became a life time reality, and as Uma Chakravarty puts it, with the death of her husband the widow too ceased to be a person (Chakravarty,1995). The worst scenario was perhaps for those who were widowed even before they could go to their husband's house and start their conjugal lives. Child widows were many and they were made to live a nightmare the causes of which they probably could not even grasp clearly at their tender age. An eight year old is made to mourn the death of a person whom perhaps she had seen only at the time of her marriage. She is made to live with the guilt that the reason of her husband being dead was nothing but her misfortune alone. In *Swarnalata*, we see how Swarna's friend Lakshmi was widowed even before she could start her married life, and how it was she who was blamed for the calamity, even while the cause of death was physical illness. *Pass Chotalar Kathakata* has managed to give an extremely sensitive and moving description of the condition of Assamese child widows - how their mothers lamented with the pain of seeing their young daughters' lives change in a moment, the girls who loved to have meals with fish and meat, were forced to accept a vegetarian diet, their bodies now had to be covered only with white robes and lives were restricted to the boundaries of their household. The little, growing girls reeled in hunger while they were allowed just one meal only in the daytime. The mothers tried different ways to keep their daughters fed, for instance an account was given of a mother who tied her widow daughter's hand, when she would take her afternoon nap, to the plate of rice that she was served in the day so that her hand won't move away from it

and the mother could fill up more in the same plate when the daughter woke up just before sunset. For the daughter it would be continuing the same meal as her hand wouldn't be washed nor would the plate be changed. Hence, even though in reality she would have eaten twice, it would count as only one meal in the day, saving the little widow of intense hunger. In circumstances as dire as these, the concept of widow remarriage was abominable and impossible, the Widow Remarriage Act passed in 1856 was merely inked on paper than anything else. The widow was to live a life of the dead and all the different forms of restraints imposed on her were to ensure that her body could not grow or flourish enough to harbor desire, for again the syntax of society does not validate any form of desire other than what was expected in a marriage settlement. *Mrigonabhi* where the story line is comparatively more recent than the other works considered here (set in late 20th century), depicts how Sontara, a modern day working woman, a single mother, and widow of a man known for his notoriety who was murdered for his very acts of sexual harassment, was but questioned and ridiculed when she finally found companionship again. When the family of her deceased husband turns her son (who she had single handedly raised) against her, the story brings forth the question- how and why a single woman finding love interpreted as moral degradation and an act of injustice towards her dead husband? The curbing of a widow's freedom and desires were again directly related to matters of property and whether or not she had a share on her deceased husband's wealth. Her association with an outsider could mean loss of property for the family, especially if she had a son who was to inherit his dead father's fortunes. To prevent situations like these, it was convenient to chalk out standard norms which then became contributions to the syntax of the language of desire.

Conclusion

The language of desire is as old as humankind. Human bodies have wished to be embraced and pleased. The bindings of what we understand today as romantic, heterosexual, monogamous love might have been later additions to the changing fabric of inter-personal relations which are deeply entangled to the material world around; wherein the ideas of property and inheritance determine what is acceptable and what constitutes perversion and vulgarity. As mentioned earlier in the essay, the society made its own grammar book of desire, a set of structures and rules which tried to captivate the physical desires and longing in humans, especially women, the control over whose bodies was essential to determine the patrimony of the children that would be born out of her womb. This was an important knowledge as the location of the birth of a child sustained the entire foundation of the society, which religion or caste the child was born into, what occupation a child could pursue and what a child could inherit. Women, as a separate category of control, in relation to kinship networks is hence constructed primarily within the family and defined by it (Mohanty,1984). The dominated

body of the woman also became a reflection of masculinity by 'being the site of its absence'; the more the absence of powers of decision making for the women, the more the proof of prowess of the males in the family who keep their females well subdued (Butler,1990). What is but interesting is that the presence of such strict rules in the first place is indicative of the fact that attraction and desire were only the most natural sensations which had to be curbed with coercion and fear. More often than not we see people daring to break these rules, and register their small attempts of dissent, instances which formed backdrops and stage for writers and other artists to work upon. These small voices were however significant, reflecting the under-bellies of the functioning societies, portraying what became acts of subversion under varying circumstances and how over time the perception of the same behaviors could vary drastically. Taking puberty, marriage and widowhood as the three landmarks, this essay has made a preliminary attempt at comprehending how the expression of desire was constricted through control over the female body. The essay has tried to explore this reality of women's life with examples from Assamese literary sources. The grim reality is that most of these restrictions are still observed and some have changed forms over time to keep up with the pace of the changing world. Control over the bodies of one section of the society is a tool to ensure that they forever remain the subjugated lot and their subjugation is the foundation for the rest to flourish upon; methods have changed but this basic idea remains the same. An ideal society free of suppression, free for expressions of love and desire, a society with equal opportunities for all is often conceived as an utopia. However, what is the truth after all? Is not the labeling of a vision as utopian only a means to ascertain that the dream is never strived for, that ultimately complacency with the present is the only rational, practical way to live? Had that been the truth, would societies have not stagnated ages ago, at the very instance of their inception?

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