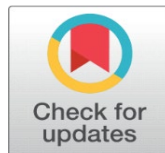


THE FEMALE VOICE IN PATRIARCHAL WORLDS: COMPARING PREMCHAND AND BINA BARUAH

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ABSTRACT

Indian fiction has witnessed the emergence of novelists who have profoundly shaped readers' understanding of societal structures, human emotions, and moral dilemmas. Among these luminaries, Munshi Premchand, often hailed as the King of Novelists in India, and Birinchi Kumar Baruah, writing as Bina Baruah, form a compelling pair for comparative exploration. Both authors, though writing in different linguistic and cultural milieus, exhibit a remarkable capacity to render the intimate experiences of women under patriarchal constraints. This seminar focuses on two of their representative works- Nirmala by Premchand and Jibanar Batot by Baruah examining how these novels articulate themes of suffering, endurance, duty, and the quest for dignity within the confines of societal expectations. By juxtaposing these texts, this study aims to highlight the universal resonance of female subjectivity portrayed by male authors and to underscore the socio-cultural dynamics that shape their narratives.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. OBJECTIVES

The primary objectives of this seminar are to foreground the narrative strategies employed by Premchand and Baruah in their depiction of female protagonists, to interrogate the socio-cultural themes of dowry, marriage practices, and women's emancipation as they emerge in Nirmala and Jibanar Batot, and to reveal the underlying humanistic concerns that unite these novels across regional boundaries. This analysis will further seek to demonstrate how both authors, through empathetic characterization and moral engagement, advance a critique of patriarchal norms and provide insights into the lived realities of Indian women.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Munshi Premchand's oeuvre encompasses a series of novels: Seva Sadan, Premashram, Rangbhumi, Pratigya, Vardaan, Gaban, Karmabhumi, Kayakalp, and his crowning achievement Godan which collectively offer an unflinching portrayal of peasant life and social injustice in early twentieth-century India. Critics have long admired his capacity to infuse his characters with psychological depth, situating personal tragedies within broader socio-economic frameworks. Scholars such as Om Abosthi and Narendra Kohli have examined Premchand's portrayals of women, noting his pioneering use of female interiority and moral reflection in Hindi literature.

Birinchi Kumar Baruah's contributions to Assamese literature, particularly through his pseudonym Bina Baruah, are epitomized by *Jibanar Batot*. Esteemed critics like Dr. Hiren Gohain have lauded this novel as an unparalleled exploration of women's suffering and resilience, not only in Assamese but across Indian literatures. Secondary sources by Umesh Deka and Prafulla Kataki provide critical frameworks for understanding post-war Assamese fiction, highlighting Baruah's narrative restraint and his impersonal narrator who nonetheless conveys profound empathy.

Gerda Lerner's seminal work on the origins of patriarchy offers a useful theoretical backdrop, situating the exploitation of women within historical processes that commodified female labor and sexuality. This feminist historiography underscores the seminar's commitment to reading *Nirmala* and *Jibanar Batot* as interventions in patriarchal discourses that continue to shape women's lives in modern India.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a combination of textual analysis and comparative literature methodology. Close reading of *Nirmala* and *Jibanar Batot* allows for identification of thematic parallels and divergent narrative techniques. The novels are examined through a feminist lens, drawing on historical and literary scholarship to contextualize the depiction of dowry practices, arranged marriages, and the moral agency of female characters. Secondary critical works, including histories of Assamese literature and studies on Premchand's narrative ethics, inform the analysis, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in established scholarly discourse. Throughout, the research maintains a balance between theoretical rigor and sensitivity to cultural nuances inherent in Hindi and Assamese literary traditions.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The protagonists of *Nirmala* and *Jibanar Batot* illustrate the pervasive impact of patriarchal structures on women's lives. In *Jibanar Batot*, the character Togor endures sustained humiliation at her father-in-law's home, internalizing suffering as a duty she must perform without complaint. Her internal monologue reveals a self-sacrificial ethos: she resolves that her own happiness is negligible compared to the obligation she owes to her husband's family. This silent endurance becomes her defining characteristic, reflecting a socially sanctioned model of femininity that valorizes obedience and emotional restraint.

Similarly, in *Nirmala*, the eponymous heroine confronts personal tragedy with a poignant blend of resignation and moral reflection. Facing her terminal illness, *Nirmala*'s requests to her mother-in-law regarding the future welfare of her infant daughter are suffused with regret and maternal concern. Her lamentation that she has "failed to make anybody happy" and her invocation of spiritual morality underscore how individual suffering becomes a lens for broader existential and ethical questions. Both Togor and *Nirmala* thus occupy liminal spaces between agent and victim: they articulate their inner lives in moments of vulnerability yet remain constrained by the imperative to sacrifice personal desires for familial duty.

Narratively, Premchand exercises the omniscient voice to offer evaluative commentary on social ills, employing moralizing passages that situate his characters' dilemmas within India's larger cultural and economic contexts. His depiction of dowry and child marriage is unflinching, positioning these practices as systemic injustices that crush individual autonomy. By contrast, Baruah's impersonal narrator adopts a more observational stance, rendering village and household scenes with documentary precision. His prose eschews overt moralizing in favor of subtle portrayals of everyday life, allowing readers to infer the ethical dimensions of Togor's struggles. Despite these stylistic differences, both authors demonstrate a shared commitment to fidelity in characterization and to exposing the human costs of oppressive social norms.

The thematic convergence of dowry, marital repression, and the quest for women's emancipation becomes particularly striking when the two novels are read side by side. Both Togor and *Nirmala* express desires for respect and dignity, yet societal structures thwart their fulfillment. Togor's vow not to "grumble" or burden others with her own sorrow mirrors *Nirmala*'s suppression of personal anguish in favor of maternal duty. Their narratives reveal how patriarchal ideology inculcates self-sacrificial behavior, rendering women's suffering both invisible and valorized. Yet, by giving voice to their interiority, Premchand and Baruah challenge readers to recognize these sacrifices as symptoms of deeper social maladies.

Moreover, the universal humanistic concerns in Jibanar Batot and Nirmala extend beyond regional specificity. While Baruah's vivid depictions of Assamese domestic life and tea-garden communities anchor Jibanar Batot in its cultural milieu, the novel's core questions about duty, suffering, and moral obligation resonate with a pan-Indian audience. Likewise, Premchand's narratives, though rooted in North Indian rural settings, achieve global relevance through their exploration of universal ethical dilemmas. This transregional appeal attests to the enduring power of both writers to capture the complexities of human experience under patriarchal constraints.

5. CONCLUSION

A comparative reading of Jibanar Batot and Nirmala reveals the profound empathy and narrative skill that Munshi Premchand and Birinchi Kumar Baruah bring to their portrayals of women's lives. Through sustained attention to interiority, moral conflict, and social critique, both authors foreground the personal dimensions of systemic oppression. While Premchand's moral commentary and Baruah's impersonal observational style diverge stylistically, they converge thematically in exposing the human costs of dowry, arranged marriage, and patriarchal duty. These novels not only illuminate specific regional experiences but also engage universal humanistic concerns, making them indispensable to any discussion of Indian novelistic traditions and gender studies.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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None

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