

**Emergence Of The Issue Of Women's Identity In Assamese  
Literature: A Study Of Ramnabami-Natak**

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**Abstract:**

*In the literary landscape of Assam (in India)- in the middle of the nineteenth century, in the fictional and dramatic literature, foregrounding of the problematic concept of identity was yet to receive due attention from the contemporary writers. Making an exception to this scenerio, significantly in 1857, Gunabhiram Baruwa wrote a play: Ramnabami-Natak, to reflect upon aspects of the subversion of women by the labyrinthine traps of a male-dominated society. It was the first definitive statement to be made in the contemporary Assamese literature about the predicament of women in a traditional Indian set up opening up an influential argument in favour of women's moral voice against*

*certain codes of conduct assigned to them by the society which tended to maintain patriarchal dominance against them. All through the play, the protagonist exhibits her independence in choice as she rejects the institution of widowhood. Her struggle to emerge as a literate woman is also another brave act by her. It is significant to note that at a time when even in Europe, most women had been blatantly exposed to the control and subversion of the patriarchy amounting to their inferior status(politically, legally, economically and socially), and the movement to achieve social equality for women had been still at its nascent state, in a faraway and geographically distanced frontier state*

*like Assam someone did seek to discover the deep seated causes of women's suppressions and affirmed his unequivocal supports to the cause of emanipation of women beyond the parameters of patriarchal structures. The playwright shows how women are led to the process of subjectivation within the politics of patriarchal power structures. This study attempts to investigate the craft of Gunabhiram Baruwa in providing a dialogic mould to his dealing with an issue which must have been quite a sensitive subject in his contemporary social milieu. Baruwa combines realism with his comprehensive moral vision while he intrinsically shows the struggle of the protagonist to uphold her identity. The methodology adopted for the study would be close reading coupled with highlighting and analysing of selective specimen that put in perspective the dynamics of identity.*

*Keywords: identity, subversion, widowhood, patriarchy, dialogic*

The influence of the Western education in all fields of literature in India including the state of Assam in the nineteenth century had been very strong. This influence did permeate through all the types and genres of literature including drama. English education helped in introducing a humanistic

and secular tradition in literature and the English educated writers found in European science and arts a new and vigorous source of creative inspiration. Due to the new orientation through the new wave of influence of English education, new thoughts, new forms and new modes of expressions came to affect almost every genre of the Assamese literature. It was at the backdrop of this new wave that a few literetteurs tried to spread modern ideas through their own literary works, thus performing a pivotal role in shaping the Assamese mind and the Assamese literature. In 1857, Gunabhiram Baruwa (1837-94) wrote a play: *Ramnabami-Natak*, to reflect upon aspects of the subversion of women by the labyrinthine traps of a male-dominated society. It was the first definitive statement to be made in the contemporary Assamese literature about the predicament of women in a traditional Indian set up, opening up an influential argument in favour of women's moral voice against certain codes of conduct assigned to them by the society which tended to maintain patriarchal dominance against them. The play represented lucidly his conviction of the fact that no liberation of women could be possible without female education and no real progress of the society could be attained without proper education of the womenfolk. This study attempts to investigate the craft of

Gunabhiram Baruwa in providing a dialogic mould to his dealing with an issue which must have been quite a sensitive subject in his contemporary social milieu. Baruwa combines realism with his comprehensive moral vision while he intrinsically shows the struggle of the protagonist to protect and preserve her identity braving all the predicaments associated with the process of subjectivation within the politics of patriarchal power structures. The playwright to emphasize upon the urgency of the need of discovering the deep seated causes of women's suppressions in his contemporary society, creates the theme of the tragic consequences of the amorous relationship between a Brahmin widow: Nabami and a Brahmin youth Ramchandra. The methodology adopted for the study would be close reading followed by highlighting and analysing selective specimen that put in perspective the dynamics of identity.

From the early part of the nineteenth century, the Bengali society was being under the beneficial lights of Renaissance, which was by and large a result of the colonial encounter. This, besides other things also ushered in a very vital period for the native literature. It was a vital period also for the social and intellectual uplift of the people of Bengal and the secret of such a development lay in English education. The forerunners of

the modern Assamese literature, many of whom had been living in Kolkata at that time in their pursuit of higher studies, came in contact with the influence of English literature and Western liberalism through their exposure to an environment which made them aware of their own national identity coupled with adoption of an analytical attitude. Groomed under the most favourable and vital condition laid out by the Renascent Bengal, they in returning home(Assam), took note of the contemporary socio-political conditions of their state. A few of them felt it was their onerous responsibility also to do something for the sake of the Assamese language and literature. The Assamese literature and language through passage of time received a strong ground to flourish in their hands. The humanistic, secular tradition was introduced into the Assamese literature by them and in turn they ushered in a renaissance for their literature (which meant a total break with the earlier tradition of religion - dominated social literature). Through their literary works, they mostly attempted at social uplift, making them in many a cases instruments for bringing about social reformation.

Gunabhiram Baruwa's *Ramnabami - Natak* was indeed emblematic of such a moment of transition of the Assamese literature. In the play the playwright

advocates boldly the cause of widow-marriage. The play had a revolutionary concept due to the author's concerns and emphasis upon the rights and freedoms of the individual and his deep urge for reforms. The play was written in 1857 on his way to Assam from Calcutta in a boat and was published in 1867 in form of a book after he was transferred to Dhubri from Nagaon on his government service (he was serving as a Revenue Department official). Gunabhiram was a man of strong conviction upon his ideals and true to what he propagated about in his play, he married a widow himself. With Baruwa's *Ramnabami -Natak*, a kind of new drama came into being. The play hardly had any direct link with the pre-British Assamese drama having a four-century old history. It introduced into the Assamese dramatic literature a humanistic secular tradition in place of the earlier religion-dominated tradition. Gunabhiram's play was based on the story of a widowed girl who had secret love with a young man. Widow-marriage was a taboo in the contemporary society and just in 1856, the British government had passed the Widow Marriage Act making it discretionary for widows to enter remarriage. *Ramnabami -Natak* with its issue of women emancipation opened up a new vista in the Assamese literature. It was the first secular cum social kind of drama to be written in the

language and following the footsteps of its author a number of new generation writers, mostly comprising of university- educated bright young men, yielded their pen to carry forward the trend, who together laid a strong foundation for the modern Assamese literature.

Gunabhiram Baruwa was greatly influenced by the spirit of social reform of Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) of Bengal. Another major source of influence for him was Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91), who was vigorously advocating the cause of widow marriage and whose enthusiasm was mainly responsible for the Widow Marriage Act i.e. "The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856". Wedded to various modern ideas during his stay in Calcutta, Gunabhiram came to realize that no real progress could be possible without education. He received active help in his endeavour to make himself equipped with the modern day learning from his mentor cum near relative Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan too had been influenced by the thoughts and ideals of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and both Phukan and Baruwa felt the need of applying their learning and experiences in eradication of certain age- old taboos of the Assamese society.

The forte of Gunabhiram Baruwa was his advanced social viewpoints which he tried

to express through the medium of literature. For instance, the false social values associated with caste superiority came into sharp focus in many of his writings. He detested social hypocrisy and ridiculed the same in several of his writings. The literary talent of Gunabhiram Baruwa got its first fertile soil for growth in the pages of the *Orunodai*, to which he contributed 24 articles. The write-ups were of varied topics. A few among them were about the necessity of education for both men and women, about women's 'rights' in matters of consensual marriage and education, about widow remarriage and about the conjugal norms for the husband and the wife etc. It is significant to note that in those days when people were mired in their medieval outlook and a campaign for widow remarriage among the Brahmins had been something of an unimaginable proposition, he, in spite of being a Brahmin himself, adopted a radical posture to the established custom of his caste to write in favour of widow remarriage besides himself marrying a widow. In an article under the title: *Bidhabar Bibah* ('Marriage of a Widow') he wrote (translation mine):

"How can one who is unable to bear a child, appreciate the pains that a child bearing woman is constrained to undergo? Similarly, the men too cannot feel the intensity of sufferings that the widows

have to undergo. Oh! It is so heart-rending, : the stories about the sufferings of the widows!"<sup>1</sup>

Of course, in his essays, he did not harbour liberalism to the extent of approving the Hindu men and women to deviate from other traditional norms laid by the scriptures like the *Manu Sanghita*, thus displaying a right mixture of the Western liberal attitude and traditional Hindu opinion. In this regard, reference can be made to his article: *Bibahar Samayat ji Sakal Niyam Pratipalan Kara Kartabya Tar Katha* ("About Principles to be followed on Marriage"). In this article, he writes about the principles of the Shastras one needs to follow in beginning one's married life. Significantly, here he also affirms his views on widow remarriage by referring to the permissions given by the *Manu Sanghita* (one of the Hindu Shastras) in this regard.

*Ramnabami -Natak* is a social tragedy based on the subject of widow marriage. The play first serialized in *Orunodai* in 1857 was published as a book in 1870. It was the first modern Assamese play on a secular theme and has behind it a genuine urge for social reform. The dramatist tries to make a strong case for widow remarriage through the play besides attempting to depict realistically a slice of the social life of Assam during his time. Thus, *Ramnabami -Natak* can be

considered to be the harbinger of the new literature, characterized by relative genuineness, veracity and convincingsness in its form, content, rendering and representation. Behind the advent of such a literature, there was the changing social, cultural and economic scenario of the world as in the nineteenth century, the world came to witness a modern era where the leaders of the societies all over the globe tried to preach a religion free from orthodoxy and dogma and lay emphasis on the religion of humanity. It was an era where the tradition was challenged and old values were considered tenable no longer. Writings of Bertrand Russell, Julian Huxley, Aldous Huxley made a wide impact over the minds all across the globe through whom rationalism and ethical idealism found a good ground to grow. Rationalism was also growing in India. This also got reflected in the mass of literature produced in the country. The depiction of the individual characters and their correlations became a major concern for the narrative writers. Bengal was one of the few pioneering states in India in this regard, where in the hands of the contemporary writers a new literature concerned with the contemporary reality had been struggling to emerge. During this time there was also a burgeoning growth of newspapers and periodicals in Bengal which were the vehicles of newer reflections in the society. They

empowered people with a new freedom of thought and opened new avenues of expressions for the readers and the writers alike. The vigorousness of such a movement obviously made a positive impact upon the creative few among the educated Assamese youths. In the works of some of them, the contemporary reality of Assam and the Assamese society and the social needs found their vigorous expressions. To be precise, it was through Bengal that Gunabhiram Baruwa and his compatriots from Assam who had gone to Calcutta for studies came to adopt some fresh enthusiasms, new outlooks and modern methods in writing. They realized that there was need to be extra-conscious about the social problems that confronted their society- the Assamese society. There were during that time in Bengal various debates on diverse social issues. There were for instance, animated controversies about women's education, the practice of *Sati* which got reflections in the emerging new literature of Bengal. At the centre of all this, there were such great thinkers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. Moreover, the Widow Marriage Act was passed in 1856 when Gunabhiram Baruwa was in Calcutta. The Act was adopted following a vigorous propaganda pursued by Vidyasagar and the success of Vidyasagar in this respect was crucial in inspiring Baruwa to



begin writing the drama *Ramnabami- Natak* in 1858. Besides, Baruwa also had the opportunity to come in touch with a host of intellectuals in Calcutta during his stay there for higher studies who were known for their proactive role in the contemporary society of Bengal, through Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, his mentor. Some of them were: the author of the first novel in Bengali: Pyarichand Mitra, harbinger of women education in Bengal: Sir Radhakanta Deb, Brahma leader of more radical nature who campaigned vigorously for the education of women against child marriages: Debendra Nath Thakur, founder of indigenous theatre of Bengal: Maharaj Jatindra Mohan Thakur and President of the ‘Sanatan Dharma Rakshini Sabha’: Raja Kali Krishna Deva Bahadur.

The play: *Ramnabami- Natak* revolves around the theme of the sad end of a pair of lovers: Ram and Nabami. Nabami is a young widow with no child and both she and Ram were attracted to one another. Amidst blooming of their love, there were ‘illicit’ connections between the two and in due course of time it was unveiled to the society that she had been pregnant. At the point of being ostracized by the society the two commit suicide. The story decides the nature of the play. It is a social tragedy dealing with the situations of the tender aged widows of the Hindu society. Gunabhiram was a staunch

advocate of widow – remarriage. In his own life he practiced what he preached and he married a widow creating a sensation in the orthodox society of Assam. True to his liberal attitude towards women, he got his daughter Swarnalata admitted into the Bethune School in Calcutta. Besides, he also encouraged his wife Bishnupriya and his daughter Swarnalata to write and publish their works. He also penned various articles on issues like women’s education and marriage reforms in the contemporary Assamese journals. It is not difficult to comprehend then why Gunabhiram Baruwa wrote such a play like *Ramnabami- Natak*. Rebellious against orthodoxy, he himself later converted into a Brahma. That the play is a means for propagation of the liberal ideas of the Brahmos, is well nigh justified by the fact that it has a reference to the great social reformer Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar directly in the speech of a character who utters his name besides eulogizing upon him as a champion of the cause of widow marriage:

*PHULESWARI (aside):.....People are talking about someone called Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar*

*in Kolikata who has shown a new way and some people here are also trying to follow that path.If*

*we too could have followed that path, this would not have happened! (Translated by*

Tiolottama Misra)<sup>2</sup>

*Ramnabami -Natak* testifies Gunabhiram's urge for propagating humanistic ideals in his contemporary society. As one critique of the hypocrisies of the moral guardians of the society, it contains his pungent satire against social orthodoxies and irrationalities even as the playwright extolls freely the beauty of passionate love- which was a new spirit to be introduced into the Assamese literature. As regards to the satire, a reference point could be the conversations among the villagers and religious heads inside the *Namghar* in the second Act of the play. The anecdote gives us an explicit idea about the material appetite of the few in the so called superior section of the society. The dialogue in the mouth of the concerned characters here bring into sharp focus the want of values associated with the upper class. The playwright unveils the irony that despite their hollow principles they are shown respects by the common villagers. They are put in ridiculous light particularly at that point of the play where they are made to say that they can reduce the penalties for wrong doings if they are offered a particular amount of money as 'penance-cost' (*Ramnabami - Natak* , Act V Scene II). In this way, the exploitative tendency of a few in the society and the situation of the peasantry under their hypocritical practices are being subject to

clever ridicule.

Gunabhiram's concerns over the plight of young widows of the Hindu society are fully evident in the play. The following extracts from the Act II, Scene, 1 and Act II, Scene 3 respectively, may be illustrative of his deep feelings over the condition of the tender-aged widows of the society during his time:

*First in front of Shibakanta's house and then in the garden. Enter Nabami, Jayanti, and Urvashi.*

*Nabami: Are you observing the fast for Shivaratri today, Jayanti? Jayanti: Well, yes and no! My*

*husband is observing it. But I have secretly eaten a little bit of powdered puffed rice. Otherwise it is*

*so difficult to pull along on those long summer days. Nabami: I really wanted to observe the fast. But*

*my mother forced me to eat. When I was small, I used to fast every year on this day. If all of you come*

*along to our place tonight, we can stay awake together for Shiva. Urvashi, are you also fasting?*

*Urvashi: Oh, why should I? Since I am a widow, there is no need for me to Fast on the Shivaratri day .*

*I have fasting on this day right from my childhood till my eighteenth year. And look how I've been*

*rewarded! I don't need anymore rewards, friends! Why, Nabami, you look thinner than usual. What's the matter?*

*Nabami: Perhaps because I am not keeping well ever since I've started having my periods.*

*Urvashi: (to Jayanti): Do you hear that? If the poor girl had had the chance to go to her husband even*



once, it would not have been so. I have at least some experience on that count to relate before Yama when I die! But this girl has been deprived of even that pleasure.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \* \*

*Nabami* (To herself): .....It is true that I am a widow, but I cannot go against God's law by denying

myself the pleasures of the senses. Isn't my present condition proof enough of that fact? So,

it is not wrong to desire the company of a man. A husband is someone with whom and the man

with whom one can fulfill the main purpose of marriage. For me, this man could be that husband

if I am devoted to him and no one else, then my duty towards my husband will be done. Some

shastras may say that woman cannot take another husband if the first dies. So what? What is a

shastra? There can be no shastra above God's law. And, if women cannot marry after the

death of the first husband, why should men be allowed to do so? This proves that law is biased

against women. Such a bias is customary in the satyayug. But it cannot be for our age. For if it

was suitable custom for this age, a woman like me could not have possibly fallen in love with

another man. Should I be condemned by the society as an adulteress if I express my devotion

to this man? Certainly not! For if I remain as true to this man as I was to my first husband, then

I will surely be doing my rightful dharma as a faithful wife. If a married woman is attracted

towards another man, can she be considered a faithful wife? Certainly not! I am convinced

that if I love this man and remain faithful to him I will not break any moral law. ....<sup>4</sup>

The play also embodies Gunabhiram's candid message about the need of facilitating liberal education for women by the society. The following excerpt from the Act I Scene V of the play is illustrative in this context:

***Shibakanta's house. Enter Phuleswari, Jayanti and Nabami .***

*Jayanti*: Amoi , did you call me?

*Phuleswari*: Yes, I did. Your friend here stays all alone at home. She feels happy when you come. You can play cards with her or teach her to read.

*Nabami*: Mother, I am learning to read. I can read the small books. Jayanti is teaching me.

*Phuleswari*: (To Jayanti) Fate has been very unkind to my daughter. Otherwise, she is so good at weaving garments. She can even weave beautiful floral motifs. And now you are teaching her to read too.

*Jayanti*: I know about the weaving skills. Last year when my younger sister-in-law Kumoli got married, I had woven a seleng for her with fine cotton thread and Nabami wove the floral designs in it.

*Phuleswari*: Do you have any good books at home?

*Jayanti*: We have them all—Anandamangal, Bidyasundar, Kaminikumar, Bhoogol, Purabrittasar, Padarthabidya,

Mahabharat, Ramayan, Shakuntala, Kadambari. My friend has not read all of them. She has finished only the

Adikand of the Ramayan.

*Phuleswari: If you need money to buy books, take it from me.*

*Jayanti: All right, I will, Amoi.*

*Phuleswari: Is she reading any Asamiya books?*

*Jayanti: I have read a few, but Nabami cannot read handwritten books. She is reading Asamiya Lorar Mitra*

*and Orunudo. These books contain many good lessons. ...*<sup>5</sup>

In the play, Nabami faces an exceptional calamity in her life due to her conflict with some other characters who represent some social evils. The impulses and desires of Nabami come in for a rude shock with the evil forces of her society opposing her wishes. This causes in her a sense of wretched helplessness and desolation. Her passionate declamations embodied by her soliloquy in Act V/ Scene III, just before she commits suicide, reveals her complete loss of faith upon the system of justice of the society as it is delivered by some despotic heads. In her soliloquy, besides cursing her own destiny, Nabami also affirms that by surrendering her soul to the love of Ramchandra, she had not done any immoral deed. Her veneration for her love revealed by her soliloquy draws both our commendation and sympathy. The inner conflict in Nabami thus is able to heighten the tragic grandeur of the play. The playwright sets Nabami to voice

the mute miseries and helplessness of millions of such women terminated by the problems and predicaments caused by the patriarchal dominance against them. The play by articulating intelligence, imagination and sensitivity in a way seems to interrogate the readers/viewers about their own social conduct. The play ends in a triumphant disdain or ridicule over the follies and hypocrisies of the contemporary society.

In its content and representation, the play has the stamp of a naturalistic play. Defining and discussing the term Naturalism M.H.Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham in *A glossary of Literary Terms* say that the naturalist writers are those who “tend to choose characters who exhibit strong animal drives such as greed and sexual desire, and who are helpless victims both of glandular secretions within and sociological pressures without. The end of the naturalistic novel is usually “tragic”..... the protagonist of the naturalistic plot, a pawn to multiple compulsions, usually disintegrates, or is wiped out.”<sup>6</sup> - One can trace in *Ram Nabami -Natak* all these basic tenets of naturalism which have come in good stead in making an impeccable representation of the human condition related with the identity of the protagonist of the play.

To conclude, *Ram Nabami -Natak* presents an influential dialogic argument in

favour of women's moral voice against certain codes of conduct assigned to them by the society which tended to maintain patriarchal dominance against them. All through the play, the protagonist exhibits her independence in choice as she rejects the institution of widowhood. Her struggle to emerge as a literate woman is also another brave act by her. It is significant to note that at a time when even in Europe, most women had been blatantly exposed to the control and subversion of the patriarchy amounting to their inferior status (politically, legally, economically and socially), and the movement to achieve social equality for women had been still at its nascent state, in a faraway and geographically distanced frontier state like Assam someone did seek to discover the deep seated causes of women's suppressions and affirmed his unequivocal supports to the cause of emanipation of women beyond the parameters of patriarchal structures.

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