

A True Illustration Of The Pursuit Of Human Liberation: Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's Mrityunjay

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Abstract: Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya (1924-1997) was a prominent Assamese novelist, story-writer, poet, playwright, prose writer, translator, editor and literary organizer. Bhattacharya's fictional works Yaruigam and Mrityunjay helped proudly institute Assamese literature on the all-India stage. Mrityunjay is universally glorified as an outstanding novel in Assamese literature. Mrityunjay is unique in the category of novels written in the context of India's independence movement. Novelist Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya was a personality enthused by the socialist idealism. The author involves himself in the task of presenting in a realistic way the struggle and contemplations of a group of freedom fighters, who were charged with a dream of liberating their nation from the state of subjugation. The plot of the novel is centered on the incident of the derailing of a train at Mayong area close to the Nagaon district in Assam. It is a true illustration of the pursuit of human liberation.

Index Terms: Assamese Fiction, Revolution, Assam, Violence, Guerilla Warfare, Liberation.

1. INTRODUJCTION

A bold voice in the Assamese literature of the post-independence era is Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya (1924-1997). Bhattacharya, who gained fame as a novelist, story-writer, poet, playwright, prose writer, translator, editor and literary organizer, was the first Assamese to have been honoured with the Jnanpith award. The only Assamese President of the Sahitya Akademi, Bhattacharya has remained ever glowing as a novelist. In 1955 was published his first novel Rajpathe Ringiyay ("The Highway Beckons"). Producing novels in the two streams of social and political, he has offered to Assamese literature a remarkable contribution. The two most talked-about novels of Bhattacharya are Yaruigam and Mrityunjay. For Yaruigam and Mrityunjay he received respectively the Sahitya Akademi award in 1960 and the Jnanpith award in 1979.

1.1 Objective

The objective of this research paper is to critically analyze Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's outstanding novel Mrityunjay in the light of the thematic concerns of the novelist; and to identify how he has illustrated the subject of human liberation in particular, since the fictional work is based on the final movement of 1942 in the struggle for India's independence.

1.2 Methodology

The methodology adopted for study in this paper is basically analytical. The primary source used for study is the particular novel Mrityunjay, which is analyzed here. The secondary sources are books written by other authors and critics on the novel and its themes and concerns. Further, views and opinions in journals and other research papers available in various libraries have also been relatively incorporated.

2 DISCUSSION

Mrityunjay, published in 1970, is the crowning glory in the literary life of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya. Upon winning the Jnanpith award for Mrityunjay, he proudly instituted Assamese literature upon the all-India platform.

This novel is based on a singular event during the final movement of 1942 in the struggle for India's independence. Mrityunjay is unique in the class of novels written in the context of India's independence movement. The plot of the novel is centered on the incident of the derailing of a train at Mayong area close to Nagaon. Indian independence movement near its end got split, based on two idealisms: the non-violent path led by Mahatma Gandhi, that is the moderate path and the armed path led by Subhash Chandra Bose, which was the extreme way. Believers of extremism thought that freedom for the country could be secured only through guerilla warfare. The novel has been built-up on the priceless sacrifices of a section of individuals who had faith in the guerilla tactics to make their nation independent. The words written in the Preface by Birendra Bhattacharya are worth considering: "The time of the event described in the novel is the year 1942. The characters are imaginary. Of course, the unforgettable incidents in the last segment of the struggle for freedom have their glimpses and depiction here. It is not history. It is a story inspired by events that happened in one's lifetime. People of another period as well as historians will view them differently and will have separate explanations for them. Yet, the great upheaval as seen by the author, the felt thoughts of leverage and the dreams viewed through it – we cannot assume that the writers of another period or historians would be successful in informing about these. The right to speak about such experiences rests with writers of that period alone. Every period provides only to its own people the opportunity to view, to immerse in and to experience. Scholars and story-writers of some other time would probably look at them with varied perspectives. But the form that has emerged in this novel is of the time of perseverance and constant pursuit. Those who were endowed with the greatness of this pursuit and its unique sensations, here is a slight introduction to their souls. It is hard to suppose that there is a more striking pursuit that could stir the whole being and the spirit of humans than the quest for human freedom. Such a pursuit alone can succeed in a rapid transformation in the human society and the human spirit." (Bhattacharya, Preface) The author involves himself in the task of presenting in a realistic way the struggle and contemplations of a group of freedom fighters, who were charged with a dream to liberate their nation from the state of subjugation. The characters illustrated in the novel were not

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happy with the method they had adopted to gain freedom. Along with particularly the central character Mahada Goxain, a believer of non-violence in the true sense, almost all the characters go through intense internal dilemma. In the matter-of-fact presentation of this conflict inside, the writer achieves success. Most of the characters in the novel were not in favour of fetching independence by killing men. Still, for the sake of a greater need, they had to embrace such a path. For securing freedom of their motherland from the oppressive rule of the British, they picked up guns in their hands. The novel begins with this statement: "It is not easy to save yourself when you have infuriated the raw bees". This was stated by Bhibhiram" (1) That the consequence of teasing the raw bees-like freedom fighters would be horrible, the novelist has stated this hint in the very opening sentence of the novel. In this first announcement is hidden the seed of a vicious future. In reality too, the effect of a bee-bite is never pleasant. The author has furnished a forecast of future events right in the beginning. On every page of the novel, similar metaphorically potent, poetic lines have come together. The structure of the novel is not that simple. The dynamism of events impacts a massive jolt upon each reader. It is as if each page of Mrityunjay is a dynamic art work. The Second World War touched Assam and had sown the seeds of trouble. Along with the freedom movement, the terrible apparition of the Second World War shook the Assamese mass. The revolutionaries struggling for independence got split into two factions. One group held to the idealisms of Gandhi. The other faction promoted armed guerilla warfare. Portraits of revolutionaries supporting either of the idealisms have been sketched in the novel. A Vaishnava saint like Manik Bora feels: "Even in this age, like Narsingha, a poor Narayan has been incarnated. For him, this incarnation is Gandhi." (7) Against these, some had deep faith in guerilla war. Even, individuals who had conviction in Gandhi's non-violent struggle, realized one day that the path to human freedom is hardly possible through non-violence. We get to know about one character Rupnarayan, who is a young lad trained in modern education, and what he has to say: "He is filled with anger whenever anything on Gandhi is initiated. The man is honest, like a divine being. But the fight for freedom is never achievable with non-violence. If it was so, India should so long have won its independence. But India did not get its independence. Isn't Mahatma Gandhi the reason?"(176) The query put forward by Rupnarayan is as if the question of the multitude. The novelist has represented the question of thousands in Mrityunjay through Rupnarayan. Like Rupnarayan, an emerging young man believes in the path shown by Subhash Bose. According to him: "Subhash Bose has said very correctly. A battle must take place. Jayprakash and Lohia demonstrated the right path. We have to fight in a guerilla war"(176) The feelings of the educated young man Rupnarayan are the feelings of the modern youth. Through the medium of Rupnarayan, the novelist has also brought to light the fact that in world history non-violent struggles have never been considered of any value. "But when world history is observed, it is seen that in France, Russia, China, Yugoslavia, Burma, in all these places people have engaged in violent revolutions. For, with bare hands, with a sweet voice, it is hard to dethrone the oppressor-class simply by taking up a non-cooperation movement"(177) Transformation in the minds of the freedom fighters has been portrayed in this novel. Thus they planned to disrupt military communication by derailing a train using guerilla skills. Their aim was that by hook or by

crook they had to chase away the British colonialists from India. In Mrityunjay the form of the rising national consciousness of the Assamese has been beautifully reflected. The contemporary society followed the task of hoisting the tricolor flag at government offices, post offices, and courts as a regular duty. Dhanpur, the chief character of Mrityunjay, was a fiercely bold lad. Dhanpur sacrificed himself in the mission to liberate his motherland with the pledge to 'do or die'. The self-sacrifice of young men like Dhanpur is a true representation of the freedom struggle of the Assamese people. On the other hand, during the freedom movement the police and the military meted out inexpressible atrocities on the Assamese people. They shot the revolutionaries dead. A heart-rending portrayal of this demonic conduct has been managed by the novelist. Mrityunjay has the distressing story of the youth who chose to become martyrs for the sake of their motherland. "Held a meeting by travelling to Baropujiya. There was a horde of Shanti Sena at that place. Tilak Deka stood guard on the way... Just then the flash of a three-battery torch fell on his face...in spite of knowing that death was imminent, he blew the horn. If the horn wasn't blown, the whole group would have been nabbed that day. Tilak Deka said – I shall do my duty. Performed his duty. The sound of the horn reached the ears of the villagers, but at that very instant the raw body of Tilak Deka fell to the ground."(8) The police and military brutally tormented the Assamese women. Assamese daughters and daughters-in-law got raped by the military personnel. The author has represented that picture within the awful disasters in the life of the character named Subhadra. Not one, not two, as many as ten military personnel raped Subhadra. This incident enraged the Assamese males and females. This wrath is expressed through the character of Koli Baidew as in the following: "Keeping aside shame and prestige Koli Baidew said, didn't you see what happened to Subhadra? Not one, not two, not three ten of those men – fie, fie, spit. Makes my blood boil. Damned creatures, I am considering how to teach them a good lesson."(11) Then again, the freedom fighters of Assam, apart from putting to death by derailing a train belonging to the military, also gave the traitor policemen and C.I.D. personnel the death punishment. Such a picture has been sketched by the novelist in Mrityunjay. The foremost among the principal characters of Mrityunjay, Mahada Goxain, was the 'sadrhikaar' of Doipora 'Satra'. Bhibhiram, Manik Bora, Madhu Bhakat, Jayram and some others were the disciples of Shankardeva or Chaityanya Deva. So, when they involved themselves in guerilla war, they suffered from deep inner conflicts. They were on the side of ensuring freedom without murder. Opening the fish plate of the train line and derailing the train; and upon shooting to kill military members, Mahada Goxain burned in the flame of remorse and said: "It would have been so nice if we could fight without killing men. But that they did not allow. If Mahatma was outside, such a battle would not have taken place."(175) Rupnarayan is also loaded with intense guilt after derailing the train. Justifying to himself he says: "These are needed murders. The nation cannot be liberated without such killings. They are doing these with a great objective."(167) Wounded and damaged with mental conflict, Rupnarayan says in a monologue: "Who and where in the world has anyone fought without killing people."(176) The mental state of Madhu Bhakat, who suffers with the sense of guilt due to his involvement in violent jobs, has been told in Mrityunjay in this way: "If a train is derailed, simply a wooden coach and an

iron engine alone do not fall and crumble. A horde of lives would be killed. True their skin colour is white, yet they still are humans. Mahapurusha said, "The soul of a dog, a jackal and an ass, knowing them all, bow to pray before them."...But his soul shivers with the dread of killing lives. Just as grief originated in the mind of Arjuna, grief emerges in his mind."(38) It was often heard from the mouths of the Assamese simpletons -- who got associated in the task of derailing a train -- verses from Kirtan, Naam Ghosa and Dashama. Contrary to their wishes, they offered themselves for their motherland, having adopted the path of violence. Mahada Goxain, who had considered the partner in war to be closer to him than the woman in bed, fell into the jaws of death for derailing the train. Rupnarayan also sacrificed his beloved to engage in the service of his motherland. There was active participation of Assamese women in the movement for independence. The aggressiveness of the women has been illuminated in *Mrityunjay*. The character of Koli Baidew was an ideal role for many. Dynamically, Koli Baidew awakened the spirit of the freedom movement amongst women. The delineation of the tribal woman Dimi is another noteworthy facet of the novel. In various ways Dimi inspired and assisted those in the struggle for independence. The personality of Dimi brings to mind the character of Dalimi in Bezbaroa's *Joymati*. Dimi was the love of Dhanpur, a significant participant in the train-derailing act. The love-association between Dhanpur and Dimi and Dhanpur and Shubhadra takes the novel to another level. When Dimi gets married to Dili, Dhanpur gives proof of his generous moral nature by willing to accept the raped Shubhadra as his own. The progressive consciousness of Goxani, Anupama and Ratani are the constructive aspects of the novel. They reflect the progressive attitude of Assamese women. Although *Mrityunjay* is a political novel, it replicates the rituals and customs, the evil beliefs, ill practices, child marriage, pains of widowhood, folk medicine, food habits, education of women and other socio-economic facets. The novelist has introduced the readers of *Mrityunjay* to the social consciousness. The poison of 'kani' (intoxicating poppy seeds) had destroyed the Assamese society. The reflection of characters rendered lazy by the effects of 'kani' may be found in *Mrityunjay*. Novelist Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya was a personality enthused by the socialist idealism. The influence of socialist leaders may be seen in *Mrityunjay* as well. At several places of the novel Bhattacharya has stated the names of Jayprakash Narayan, Lohia, Shubhash Bose, among others. He was motivated by Gandhism. In *Mrityunjay* Shubhadra the Gandhian weaver, the reference to Koli Baidew, abandoning of 'kani' by Ahina Konwar, Mahada Goxain taking up a liberal stance against the caste demarcations are only a few instances of the novelist's reverence for the philosophies within Gandhism. We may identify the attribute of the political idealism of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharjya as democratic communism. This is also seen in *Mrityunjay*: "Kings and all aren't so desirable in the days of democracy."(28) Western influence is observed in the novels of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya. In *Mrityunjay*, inspiration from Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom The Bell Tolls* may be discerned. In addition to the subject matter, the background of both the novels is similar. In *Mrityunjay* a violent event in the heart of Assam during the time of India's struggle for independence, and in *For Whom The Bell Tolls* the story of civil war between the Republican and Fascist parties in Spain is narrated. As the setting of *Mrityunjay* are the dense forest

areas such as Mayong in Nagaon, similarly, it is a secret place of refuge surrounded by green fields somewhere in Spain, which serves as the setting in *For Whom The Bell Tolls*. Comparable to the code hero of Hemingway, Dhanpur, the protagonist of *Mrityunjay*, is endowed with immense physical power. Parallels are noted when the love episode of Robert Jordan and Maria in *For Whom The Bell Tolls* and the love story of Dhanpur and Shubhadra in the sub-plot of *Mrityunjay* are seen together. The two female characters of both the novels are broken by the horrors of war. Into the lives of these abandoned women, the ray of hope is offered by two exceptional men: Robert Jordan and Dhanpur Laskar. Noteworthy that Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya himself had translated Hemingway's particular novel to Assamese, naming it as "Deva Dundubhi Baaje Kaar Babey." Outstanding skills speak the account in Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's *Mrityunjay*. The novelist undertakes third person narration in his realistic depictions. He has incorporated traits of the Assamese language through the use of pure Assamese vocabulary, similes and proverbs. The freedom movement roused the people of every layer of the society. A true reflection of this is found in *Mrityunjay*. As against the huge section which plunged into the movement, a handful of self-interested people refused to participate. For selfish needs, the latter section got engaged in the job of C.I.D. personnel. Individuals like Layram, who represent this group, have also been delineated by the novelist in *Mrityunjay*. He has provided room for even those who took up jobs of policemen to become slaves of the British. In the final lines of *Mrityunjay*, the reader gets an impression of the novelist's notions in the question that is raised through Goxani: "He is simply reflecting on the consequence of attaining freedom, whether it will be good or bad? People have not refrained from battering and hacking. After a long pause Anupama inquired, tell me what you feel.—I am thinking if the people will be good or otherwise, if they obtained independence." Several things in reality come to prominence in the above awareness within the novel, written in the post-independence era. Significantly, Anupama and Goxani both have to don the pale attire of widows due to the struggle for freedom. The husband of Anupama is killed by freedom fighters. The husband of Goxani, Mahada Goxai, chooses to be a martyr in response to his love for his motherland. Goxani is the sister-in-law of Anupama. Both these women have one grief; and yet, at the source of this grief lay the job of opposing forces. Actually, the two women are from opposite clans and are enemies. They have unified into one another, thus demonstrating the best instance of humanity. Novelist Bhattacharya has succeeded in putting forward such ideal illustrations of humanity in the novel.

3 CONCLUSION

The novelist has made evident the manifestation of the Assamese people's participation in the Indian movement for independence, through *Mrityunjay* which is universally glorified as an outstanding novel in Assamese literature. *Mrityunjay* is the living record of the self-sacrifice of the Assamese in the freedom struggle. *Mrityunjay* is the successful illustration of the psyche of those who were broken by internal conflict at the crossroads of violence and non-violence. *Mrityunjay* is a true picture of the pursuit of human liberation.

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