International Journal of Research in Social Sciences
Vol. 9, Issue 3, March - 2019,
ISSN: 2249-2496 Impact Factor: 7.081
Journal Homepage: http://www.ijmra.us, Email: editorijmie@gmail.com
Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories Indexed & Listed at: Ulrich's Periodicals Directory ©, U.S.A., Open J-Gate as well as in Cabell's Directories of Publishing Opportunities, U.S.A

Faith, hope and desperation- a study of the themes in Shantana Saikia's translation of Dhrubajyoti Borah's *Hunger*

Md. ShalimMuktadir Hussain

***Abstract**: Dhrubajyoti Borah's novels deal with the intricacies of life on the banks of the Brahmaputra River in Assam. In all his novels and short stories he explores the lives, loves and losses of people living in the valley of the largest river in India's North East. Hunger follows the route of his other books and depicts the life of an ordinary daily wage labourer from the Bengali-Muslim/ Bengal origin Muslim community in Assam. This short book, in essence more of a novella than a full-fledged novel, goes through the life of Farman as he comes to maturity, marries, innocently selects a life that leads him down a dark path and ends up in the state of a beast- naked, helpless and brutal. It's a tragic story, particularly so because it deals with the life of a man who has almost nothing to start with. His slow movement upwards in social mobility and sudden fall back into despondency may not be classically tragic but is deeply entrenched in pathos. This paper looks at the dominant themes of the novel, not in the original Assamese but in Shantana Saikia's translation of the same.*
Keywords: Hunger, poverty, beast, chars

Someone reading Dhrubajyoti Borah's *Hunger* for the first time can easily avoid asking one question- when was the book written? For one, the tale of a desperate man unwittingly turning to crime is unfortunately eternal. In the context of the *chars* (river islands) of Assam where the story is set this is a common occurrence even today. The *chars* are alluvial sandbars that come up in the middle of the Brahmaputra and are gone within a few years. When they surface they are put to agriculture by the mostly landless farmers who live on the banks of the great river. When they sink the farmer has no land to till and has to seek employment elsewhere.

The community Farman belongs to, though it is not brought to the fore by Borah is the Bengal origin Muslim community or Bengali Muslim community of Assam. Ancestors of this community were brought to present day Assam by the Briish administration in the late 19th century and settled in 'waste lands' of the state. Gorky Chakraborty writes about the history of migration of the community as follows:

> The process of facilitating the transfer of population could not gather momentum till the first Partition of Bengal (1905), when Assam and East Bengal became a single entity under one administration. What started during the first decade of the 20th century had a deep impact on the demographic profile of the state. These farm settlers not only brought huge tracts of land under cultivation but also diversified the crop profile in Assam. It is estimated in the Census of India, 1951, that the total number of migrants from East Bengal were around one to one and a half million, which was between one-tenth to one-sixth of the total population of the state.(Chakraborty)

Most of the 'waste lands' they were settled in were the *char-chaporis*. In due course of time, the geography to which the people belonged became their primary identity as they began to be referred to as char-chapori Muslims. In a sense, their geography now became a part of their history and identity. Some of the farmers do manage to find employment while some turn to petty crime. Farman's story follows the later trend and is by no means an exception.

The Bengali Muslim peasants were settled in these waste lands, the chars and chaporis of Assam (riverine areas) and over time gained the nomenclature of *char-chapori*Musalmans. There were initial confrontations with local communities over land until the British administration introduced

for a brief period the inner line permit which demarcated land to be used by indigenous communities of Assam and the newly immigrant Muslim peasants (Goswami). The permit system failed because land continued to change hands. In any case, the Bengali peasants became residents of Assam and continued to grow food on the chars.

One of the often quoted official reports that continues to be a bone of contention is C S Mullan's census report of 1931. In the report Mullam first proposed the idea that the settlement of Muslim peasants in Assam was part of a conspiracy. The language used in the report seems to suggest that the aim of the Muslim peasants was to willingly cause a demographic imbalance in the state and slowly take over. He writes:

> By 1921 the first army corps of invaders had conquered Goalpara. The second army corps which followed them in the years 1921-31 has consolidated their position in that district and has also completed the conquest of Nowgong . The Barpeta Subdivision of Kamrup has also fallen to their attack and Darrang is being invaded. Sibsagar (Sivasagar) has so far escaped completely but few thousand Mymensinghias in North Lakhimpur are an outpost which may during the next decade prove to be a valuable basis of major operations. (Mullan)

It is the virtue of the book that Borah doesn't even touch upon the questions of legitimacy or belongingness vis a vis the community to which Farman belongs. Borah is more interested in the fall of an everyman. A post-modern reading of texts tells us that there is no universal everyman. This belief comes from the central post-modern version to metanarratives. The idea of a universal hero or universal everyman also borrow from the same structure of metanarratives. As such it is necessary to qualify that though Farman might seem to be an everyman, he doesn't belong to a specific category of 'Indian' or even 'Assamese' everyman. He can be said to be representative of the poor Indian agricultural worker in a certain sense but in a country and state with multiple ethnicities and severe economic disparity, it is difficult to find the exact intersection of ethnic identity and lack of economic opportunity that can create the archetypal everyman.

Another advantage of Borah's novel is that the characters are enclosed in a bubble so that their interaction with the outer world are limited. This is in keeping with the socio-economic condition of the chars which are so backward, with lack of access to transport and communication, that they are physically distant from the rest of 'mainstream' Assam and India. Their only connection with the rest of the world is when they go out of their villages to towns and cities for work. In the typical Indian phraseology, everything outside the village or known geography becomes 'Videsh' or 'foreign' and unfamiliar. The contact with the outside world might have exposed the ethnic and other faultlines in the state and made Borah's work far more complex. Instead, Borah keeps the characters in a bubble of sorts and thus maintains only one disparity- one of economic inequality. Farman belongs to the lowest rung of the ladder and it is because of this that he is constantly victimised and reduced to a bestial state. All his other problems- the departure of his wife and his rapid movement towards crime are all attributed to only this cause. This prevents the story from being a study of ethnic conflict and hatred:

> The stereotypes may or may not be accurate character analyses, that is, they may or may not be in accord with actual, empirically verifiable personality traits. The point is, rather, that the folk stereotypes exist and more importantly that countless people make judgments on the basis of them. There is probably no other area of folklore where the element of belief is more critical and potentially dangerous, not only to self but to others(Dundes).

The one defining emotion of this novel is pathos. At the beginning of the novel Farman is a landless agricultural labourer who has been hungry for more than a day. He is so familiar with hunger that he can correctly guess how an extended period of hunger is going to affect him. However, he is too proud to beg- he will work for food but he won't accept anyone's charity, even if a gift of food will keep him face one more day. Farman's strong sense of self-respect also keeps him from approaching his sister and brother-in-law for help. At a certain point Farman's sense of puffed self-respect is not enough to sustain him and he succumbs to a nefarious trade deal. He unwittingly makes a Faustian pact with a rich but shady businessman. This allows him a very brief period of happiness and stability. He earns money, finds love, starts a family and even stands up to his condescending sister and brother-in-law. Also, for the first time in a long time he understands what it means to be well-fed. The chickens, however, come home to roost and as in every classic story of a Faustian pact gone wrong, prosperity doesn't last. Farman loses his money, his wife and finally his mental stability.

In the *chars* we have a cautionary folktale. A young boy is about to leave home to take up a position as a *rakhal* (resident servant/cowherd/agricultural help) at a rich man's place. He asks his widowed mother if she has any parting advice for him. 'There is an abundance of food at the rich man's house', the old woman says, 'eat one extra morsel of rice at every meal'. The boy takes her advice. The first day he is humble and eats only one plate of rice. The next day he asks for a little more rice; and a little more the next day and so on. Over the months he develops a rapacious appetite. The rich man's granary is overflowing with rice and he has numerous *rakhals*; he doesn't notice the minor depletion in his stock of rice. The harvesting season ends and the boy and his ever-growing hunger return home. His mother realises the severe mistake she has made- her son looks like a rice barrel and eats more than three people's share of rice. The moral of the story is prudence- good times don't last, so don't let greed overtake you.
Every story of Faustian overreach or relative overreach is an inversion of the Semitic story of Job (Ayyub in the Quran). It is a riches-to-rags-to-riches story. A jealous God tests Ayyub's love for him by bringing misfortune and pestilence upon him- his family, cattle and lands are taken away. The religiously stoic Ayyub remains steadfast in his belief in God. However, God is still not satisfied and finally attacks Ayyub's body. He is afflicted with sores that cover him from head to foot. Ayyub still maintains his unwavering love for God and is finally rewarded. Everything he has lost is restored to him. The Quranic account of the story of Ayyub/Job is important because in this account Job doesn't doubt God even once. In short, he refuses to sell his soul. *Hunger* is not a moral story, so the occasionally benevolent and occasionally intemperate God is missing from the narrative. There is no powerful force, divine or societal, to maintain balance in Farman's world. The forces that exist, the mattabars, maulavis and the police, are not agents of justice but status quo. For them an individual scapegoat is often necessary to maintain peace. This is why they look away when Farman is brutalised for crimes he has committed and crimes which are thrust on him. In a post-God world the final attack is not on Farman's body but on his mind. Put under the immense pressure of acting according to his altered circumstances and knowing that there is no saviour to turn things around for him, Farman loses his mental equilibrium towards the end of the book. He takes off his lungi, his last piece of clothing, and is reduced to a physical and metaphysical nakedness. In this primordial state the only word that Farman can now speak is the one that has reduced him to the stature of a hunted beast- hunger.

It is a lazy statement to make at this point but in a sense Farman's life reflects the geography he lives in. He is as unstable as the river and the *chars*. He has shifted his house multiple times based on the rise and submergence of *chars* in river. Life is more transient here than anywhere

else. Borah uses a metaphor that sparkles even in translation- life in the *chars* is like gourd flowers. As anyone who grows vegetables would know, gourd flowers have a very short life. Male flowers wilt and die while female flowers turn into gourd. The translator, Shantana Saikia, does a fine job of retaining the metaphors from the original Assamese without opting for English equivalents. There is an obvious limitation to the use of metaphors since they are rooted in the original language and culture, but the translator often manages to find a way out. The length of the novel restricts the writer's focus on only one character; this keeps the novel streamlined but reduces the other characters to plot devices. This focus also prevents the novel from turning into a grand allegory of the *chars*, though the reader might choose to interpret it that way. Life in the *chars* might be bleak and the transitory nature of the geography may make the formation of very complex social structures difficult, but people in the *chars* do find ways to deal with their hard lives. Amidst the difficulties people find time for music, love and festivals- social rituals that help blunt the difficult lives they live. Celebration doesn't find much space in the novel, again because of its concentrated focus, but as long as the reader is willing to read the book as a sympathetic story of one person in particular and the human condition in general, the novel delivers a honest and brutal picture of the primeval state of hunger and the equally primeval urge of survival.

Works Cited

Borah, Dhrubajyoti. *Hunger*. Trans. Shantana Saikia. New Delhi: Red River, 2020. Print.

Chakraborty, Gorky. "The "Ubiquitous" Bangladeshis." *Economic and Political Weekly* 47.35 (2012). Web. 11 September 2020. <https://www.epw.in/journal/2012/35/web-exclusives/ubiquitous-bangladeshis.html>.

Dundes, Alan. "A Study of Ethnic Slurs: The Jew and the Polack in the United States." *The Journal of American Folklore* 84.332 (1971). Web. 11 September 2020. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c590/47e69e05d7a46286b8738efa71bb769eabe6.pdf>.

Goswami, Uddipana. "Miya or Axamiya? Migration and politics of assimilation in Assam." *J-SAPS* (2010).

Mullan, C S. *Census of India 1931 Volume III Assam Part I Report.* . Calcutta: Government of India Central Publication Branch, 1932.