Creative Saplings, Vol. 02, No. 01, August 2009
ISSN-0974-536X, https://creativesaplings.in/
Email: editor.creativesaplings22@gmail.com

An Imaginary Haven- Madhupur or Macondo: Reaching out to Sheelabhadra's World

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ABSTRACT

Sheelabhadra belongs to a different geo-cultural locale among contemporary Assamese story writers. He draws on the pastoral disquiet landscape and continues to delve deep into the recesses of his memories of a home far removed from the proximity of his physical reality, yet he remains a spirited troubadour traversing the bucolic terrains within, along the rhythms of Madhupur musings - his reinvented home- fashioned by his imaginations. Sheelabhadra's stories take him on a critical journey into the past, attempting to reach out to the moments that shaped him as an individual and as a member of a historical community. In telling the stories, these writers have a safe haven to return to. They allow events and people to migrate from the villages of their own memories to the narrative of the stories, where they quickly become immortal in their respective fictional universes. This paper would make an attempt to make a brief analysis of his select works and their significance in our understanding of a history, which is more than a mere impersonal recording of information, it is rather a chronicling of the annals of a past with the warmth of intimacy.

Keywords: *Nativity, Nostalgia, mythology, Memory, self-journey, History and Memory.*

Among the contemporary Assamese story writers, Sheelabhadra belongs to a different geo-cultural locale. He draws on the landscape of the pastoral disquiet and keeps going back deep into the recesses of his memories of a home long distanced from the proximity of his physical reality, yet he remains a spirited troubadour traversing the bucolic terrains within, along the rhythms of Madhupur musings – his reinvented home- fashioned by his imaginations.

The locale that Sheelabhadra keeps coming back to is his native village mythically renamed Madhupur. He achieves the formation of an easy narrative, deceptively unpretentious, creating a universe where history and memory happily dissolve into each other; stories and characters of the past become part of a mythology and the landscape, which forms the backdrop of his tales, reaches out onto the archaeology of his nostalgia. His creative position is, unlike the romantic claims, is not informed by any chance encounter with epiphanic surge; rather he is a conscious artist, aware of and alert to what he is to write about, at the same time he can speak of a lost landscape without degenerating into sentimentality, for his strength lies in his ability to speak in dispassionate cerebral grit.

Revati Mohan Dutta Choudhury; born in an elite family of Gauripur in West Assam, which has its geo-cultural proximity to Bengal and the present Bangladesh; has been through unique historical experiences. He has been an intimate witness to the rise and fall of his own small town as well as to its glories and the disquieting peeling off of the shades off its walls.

He had his higher education in Calcutta, a gold medallist in Mathematics, began his career as a civil contractor and retired as a teacher of Mathematics of Assam Engineering College of Guwahati. When it came to writing, for him, it was more an attempt to reconnect himself with the most intimate and poignantly personal pasts of his own than to commit himself to any declared intervention as a writer in the domain of the public. He, in fact, had adopted the pseudonym Sheelabhadra to emerge in public as a writer. "Why Sheelbhadra?" He was asked once in one of his interviews published in Chilarian (1995). He replied simply that he had taken the name because that happened to be the name of a mathematician of ancient India and to choose a name of a mathematician was prompted by the fact that he himself was a teacher of mathematics. What he did not say was that by taking the name of a mathematician he had the latent desire to be a writer of bare precisions, the art he had mastered as a student of mathematics. Madhupur, the place of his nostalgia, is the protagonist of his stories. His stories record, in fragments, the biography of his memories of the place that was once his home.

His stories have been translated into English, Oriya, Bengali and Hindi. It is significant that his works have received different kind of responses from the readers of different language groups and that is one of the reasons translators were tempted to translocate his stories in the domain of their respective languages. This paper would make an attempt to make a brief analysis of his select works and their significance in our understanding of a history, which is more than a mere impersonal recording of information, it is rather a chronicling of the annals of a past with the warmth of intimacy.

Sheelabhara is a prolific writer. His major collections of short stories are Madhupur Bahudur (Madhupur's is Far Away); Akou Madhupur (Madhupur Haunts); Apon Manuh (My Own People) among other. One of his major novels is Godhuli (The Twilight). This novel has been translated into English, Hindi and Oriya, while his short stories have been translated into Bengali, Oriya, Hindi and English.

Sheelabhadra, through his stories, makes a critical journey into the recesses of the past and tries to reach out to the moments that so formidably shaped his self as an individual and a part of a

historical community. In his ability to invent a locale where myths and memories arrogate as integral components of his narrative texture, Sheelbhadra is in league with the other significant writers of our century- Gabriel Garcia Marquez, R.K. Narayan, O.B. Vijayan in whom the place itself graduates into protagonist. In Marquez it is Macondo; in R.K. Narayan we have the ubiquitous Malgudi; in O.V. Vijayan we have the tales of Khasak and in Sheelbhadra we have Madhupur. These writers, in telling the stories, have a comfortable place to go back to. They let the events and individuals expatriate from the villages of their own memories to the narrative of the stories and they soon become immortal in their respective fictional universe.

Sheelabhadra's Madhupur is the Gauripur of the mid twentieth century. He nostalgically recalls the days when the place imbibed with the easy joys of comfortable lives where time had its own laid back pace to move on. The west Assam, the erstwhile Goalpara district in Assam, had its unique historical past and cultural legacies quite different from the rest of the state. The old Goalpara district had a feudal past unlike the rest of Assam, hence the lores and the folk ways, the stories and legends, the myths and music bore different hues and dimension quite uncommon from the cultural expressions in the mainstream Assam. Goalpara was one of the central parts of the medieval Kamrup-Kamata kingdom, which was the seat of tantric religious practices where mother goddess was worshipped as the ultimate source of shakti and power. This Kamrup-Kamata was also the original abode of non-Aryan goddesses like Kamakhya, Kali and Durga. This was also the place where the Vaishnavite movement of Srimanta Shankardeva flourished. If we look at Bengal's cultural history, it was mainly in the sixteenth century when Durga and Kali made entry in a major way in the Hindu households in Bengal firstly, as a religious assertion against the powerful rules of the Nawabs in Bengal (the way Oriya Vaishnavite saint Sri Chaitannaya carried out nagar kirtana in the streets of Nabadwipa as an act of asserting religious freedom against the oppressive impositions of the Nawabs in Murshidabad), and later Durga became a symbol of aristocratic assertions of the nouveau riche emerged during the late eighteen century colonial Bengal. Durga was primarily worshipped by the feudal households of Bengal in a fashion the Kings used to worship the Goddesses of Shakti for victories in war and battles. From the mystic abode of the Tantric seats of Kamrupa, the deities attain status of a domestic goddess with their power being restricted within the confines of the so called bonedi households in Bengal where the rituals of worshipping the goddesses, tenaciously associated with the geo-cultural history of Kamrup – Kamata, has been retained to achieve pseudo-authentic claims of cultural ownership over the religious symbols by the new practitioners of faith of Bengal. Goalpara, on the other hand, retained religious and cultural

legacies as elements of inheritance without having to reformulate them as tools of political assertions or means of assigning prestige to their social status. These cultural and historical heritages became so intrinsic to the consciousness of the people and place of Goalpara that they became too obvious for the populace to be aware of them.

Sheelabhadra's achievement lies in being able to construct a perspective to make an inward enquiry from a vantage of distance. He is both physically and temperamentally removed from the locale he was so abidingly associated with. In his endeavour to narrate the social history of his distant home, the writer recreates a narrative from the privacy of his intimate experiences. His stories, like Marquez, are essentially informed by his memories and a deep sense of nostalgia. To write about one's own home from a distance demands unusual commitments, for it forecloses free flight of artistic imaginations. He candidly admits this paradox in the beginning of one of his most famous short stories- 'Madhupur Bahudur':

It is difficult to write a seemingly objective account of one's own home without being nostalgic. And if the writer is away from home, the very distance alerts him of a pain. Home, an image prerserved so jealously, how all on a sudden, recedes onto the distant horizon. How so sadly it becomes alien.

Madhupur Bahudur

The renaming of his native place from Gauripur to Madhupur is not out of a mere imperative to expand his artistic freedom, but Madhupur in Sheelabhadra is descriptive of the former self of the place that was his home, for he finds himself as an 'alien' in the present environment of his native place now. He writes:

The Madhupur that keeps haunting me is older by decades. Madhupur was never stagnant just the way any other things are. Both the place and its people have changed so remarkably.

Rationality impels me to accept this, but then, my emotions have its own say. This is where we are destined to come to terms with pains by default, though the changes are inevitable, with or without me.

Madhupur Bahudur

He then embarks on a journeywork, deep within, to trace the territories long lost into the labyrinth of time. Gabriel Garcia Marquez creates a magic world by freely interconnecting the myths, memories and histories within the textures of his narratives without privileging one over

the other. The process of writing or recreating the distant universe of experience becomes a journey into the realms where the consciousness of the creator forms its own logic and narrative protocols. In One Hundred Years of Solitude we encounter Ursula's world deeply akin to our dreams and imaginations where, to our great relieve, rationality and other normative codes, subside into the backyard. In Marquez reality merges with magic creating a universe of its own significations. Memory gains legitimacy as a metaphor of meaning and historicity. But questions persist: "Is memory a valid enough tool of reference?" or "Is experience, which begets memories, a stable interpretive apparatus of semantics?" The poststructuralist thesis begs to differ. The postmodernists make a critique of what they call 'experiential foundationalism'. But these theorists provide us perspectives in relation to identity questions though. But the writers in question are engaged in a search of a landscape distantly poised along the universe where feelings dislocate into meanings. In R.K. Narayan, Malgudi is the place where his characters lived, so in Vijayan's Khasak. And in Sheelbhadra it is a veritable slide show that projects umpteen characters and incidents with whom he grew up.

In Sheelbhadra we come across all the people who can possibly live in any given town. There is Rajabahadur, the zamindar (Raja Prabhat Chandra Barua. His two princes, one of them was a renowned film maker Pramathesh Chandra Barua and the other one was the famous Elephant catcher Prakritish Chandra Barua, Lalji); village priest Gagan Thakur; nonchalant tabla ustad Paresh Ghosh alias Felubabu, temperamental homeopath practitioner Dinesh Doctor, the ubiquitous astrologer Satya Ganak; Chandra Seal, the biri company dancer; thatched and bamboo house making expert Parashu Dafadar, ill-tempered Keval mama; ever happy tea stall owner Ramprasad; freaky Atapjan Pagli; singing mendicant Sadhubaba, the simple minded prostitutes as well as the old and decaying aristocrats of Madhupur like Naba uncle and others who would go out of their ways to express their love with genuine sincerity. Sheelabhadra brings back all of them along with the ambience and the simple events that once formed the world of his tiny town, which he now calls Madhupur. Sheelbhadra's Madhupur stories make a creative documentation of the values, ethos, temperaments and wisdoms; desires and passions; sagacity and generous indifference as well as the ignorance and innocence of a time he once used to know as his own. He had captured the very essence of human relationship that helped the life get going. Through the warm and emotional attachment of the common people with the zamindars; the ever-accessible down to earth Rajabahadur who would closely monitor his people's wellbeing (unlike the textbook and fictional image of feudal figures); and the simple events, which once formed the entirety of their universe, his stories take us back to a

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world, not only of his own experiences but the experience of a generation. He takes us to a place so different in terms of its pure warmth of human relationships as well as its naivety that touches our heart. Through his memories he creates a world of a different dimension, at the same time his stories evoke poignant responses for they are the elegiac lore of a pastoral horizon we so avidly wish: 'If it were ours.'

* Translations cited in the text are by the author.

The paper was presented in the National Seminar on Profiling Social Change through Translations organised by the Dept. of English, NEHU, Tura Campus, on 1 & 2 November/ 2006.