Chapter IV

Contents:

Whether Freudianism was inevitable or imposed?

1. The controversy among the critics and the creative writers.

2. The two groups of critics.

3. The distinction between the continental attack and appreciation and that of ours.

4. The first cry of emancipated women and its reaction.

5. The most exoriated stories and article.

6. The critics of Freudianism.

7. The upholders of the literary application of Freudian psychology.

8. Conclusion.
Chapter IV

The question whether Freudianism was inevitable or imposed evoked strong reaction among our critics and creative writers, as it did elsewhere, and the nature of response or reaction more or less the same everywhere. We have critics of different taste and temperaments. The Vaisnavite critics, i.e., the worshippers of Viṣṇu, with their devotional leaning to a tradition of purity feel sickening at the thought of sex in human form. Literary discussion of sex in human indulgence is a taboo for them. As a matter of fact, these critics spit as unholy at all that is exotic, sexual, or materially exuberant. We have another group of critics, who spare Freud and his discoveries but exoriate the unqualified literary applications of psycho-analytic findings by the young enthusiastic writers. Psycho-analysis as a branch of science is no object of abhorrence for them. But they cannot stand as it is applied in literature with its "enticing claim that nothing exists in human being except sex" or that "sex underlies and dominates all human motives, and is the basis of all creations."

Freudianism with an Oedipus complex (i.e., every person's conjugal fate turning on his parent of the opposite sex) at the root of all abnormality, and infantile sexuality and other immoral implications on its back, they think, is as aprobrious and terrifying to our literary tradition as was a Tantrik to a poor virgin in a Buddhist temple.
Strong denunciation and admiration followed in America and England after the emergence of Freud and his discoveries in the translations of Boris Sidis, Havelock Ellis and A.A. Brill. But a distinction can be made between continental reaction and that of ours. The critics in America and Europe generally attacked or appreciated Freud and his psycho-analysis but in India or Assam the attack was generally, though not always, directed not to Freud and his science, but to the literary application of it by a group of writers. And what is disparaging is that our attack and appreciation suffer considerably by comparison with their foreign counterparts in point of prudence and sophistication. This is undoubtedly for the reason that while our critics were loud in their denunciation of its literary application, they paid little attention to know Freud and learn profusely about his discoveries. The same is, I think, no less true of our admirers of Freudianism.

The influence of Freudian psychology was first felt in the stories of Haliram Deka. But the truth of the psycho-analytic impact was brought to a revolting climax in the stories of Lakshmidhar Sarma. He is the first of our writers who declared that "the women need not always keep their mouth shut and their wombs open." His Vidrohini (The Rebellious Woman) is "a fearless statement of the sad plight of the girl widow, Lalita, and her courageous defiance of the cruel and rigid conventions of society, which thwart satisfaction of primary instincts."¹ His Vyarthatār Dān (The Gift of Frustration) and

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¹ B.K. Barua, History of Assamese Literature, p. 178.
Ciraj and Lila have women, who display the same spirit of revolt against the suppressing conventions of society and civilisation.

Lila, Lalita, Usha and Subhadra are our first enlightened women in fiction who enjoyed sex but suffered no remorse from sin. A vigorous reaction was to follow from our custodians of traditional chastity of women. But they were seen to remain silent. They might have read about these impulsive women, smelled their blood and sneezed but ignored them probably either as exceptions of the conventional type or suffered in silent resentment, assuming them as beginners of the new. But the real cause of this silence was ignorance or lack of inquisitiveness. Although our writers' interest in the relationship between men and women, their inquisitive probing into the problem of the mind, their sceptical attitude to all values of tradition - god, religion, sex, chastity, and their sympathy for sexual emancipation of women were sufficient to prove their psycho-analytic bias, still they rarely wrote about phenomena with clinical terms. They felt shy indeed to pronounce themselves either as Freudian or Marxian or both, for they had been brought up under the tradition, and had shared more or less its virtue and vice in the blood. This reticence of traditional decorum was, however, soon brushed aside by the writers who were next to follow. The new writers frankly utilised the discoveries of science to challenge the truths of religion in their fiction.

The reaction against the application of Freudian psychology was strongly burst out immediately after the
publication of Dr. Hem Barua’s Jahara and Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya’s Kalà Dàwarar Càp (The arc of Dark Clouds). Our votaries of Visnu are said to have shut their eyes when they chanced suddenly to see the heroine of Kalà Dàwarar Càp raise the ‘mekhela’ up to her knees fearing to get it wetted while she was moving across the stream.2

The neplus ultra of reaction reached when Homen Bargohain published his article, ”Asamiyà Sàhityat Navayuga” (The New Epoch in Assamese Literature) encouraging the young writers to avail themselves of the new knowledge. A swarm of articles arose in praise and denunciation in the years following the publication of Abdul Malik’s famous story, Bibhatsa Bedanā.

In two long and learned articles3 Dimbeswar Neog explains the purity and perfection of the sexual tradition in the classical Sanskrit and the medieval religious literatures and incisively criticises the modern Assamese writers of fiction who have been up in an unholy race of breaking the old taboos in the name of emancipating men and women from inhibition and oppressions. Neog explains the purity of our literary convention and displays its unreceptivity to modern sexual


3. (i) Sàhityat Aśilatat Āvāntar (Obscenity in Literature is irrelevant), pub. Ràmdhenu, XVIII, No. 11, 1887 saka.

realism which is destitute of any spiritual or religious touch in it. Sex being the vital thing of creation cannot be ignored or neglected in literature. Indian religion in all its forms, Saivism, Saktism etc., and literature and painting are alive with sex or eroticism. But sex without its connection to our soul-life (not mental life as the psychologists comprehend it) was inconceivable to these institutions. Neog continues that what Freud and his followers have done today in the direction of sex and other aspects of the mind was discovered thousands of years ago by the Indian scholars, who while explaining the nature of sex and its importance to life were not bent on separating it from religion and life's final beatitude. Religion, wealth, sex and salvation were treated as of equal importance in the achievement or accomplishment of life's perfection. There was no bar in the way of holding learned discussion on the treatise of sex by marriageable girls and boys in ancient times, Neog continues. He refers to the strong debate on the treatise of love, held between Sankaracharya and the learned wife of Madan Mishra. Discussion on sex with spiritual association is virtuous; any talk on it without divine link is a vice. The aim of literature and art is not to negate sex or to drag it into lust or concupiscence, but to refine it or subdue, i.e., to transform it to a culture. Sex being refined through religion and art or literature extals us to divinity.

Dibeswar Neog ascribes modern literary anarchy to the use of sex as a detour of indulgence. Sex, so private and so solemn has in the modern realistic fictions been a topic of
banal discussion among the writers and readers. He calls Freud their god of sex and Marx, their god of hunger, in whose blind imitation our literature has been a store-house of all possible aberrations or abnormalities.

Neog concludes that he does not seek to deny life by denying it of its dynamic nature. The change of life with the change in the environment and society is inevitable. But even in the name of universality, it is misleading and self-destroying to treat the European society and the Indian or Assamese society alike. It is not bad of our writers to accept the good ideals from others. But before doing that it is instructive, even imperative to learn to imitate with respect and adoration the good ideals of India; for he warns that the blind imitation of the fallen ideals (as he calls them) of the West would lead thus far (to worship sex in human form), and no farther (to adore spiritualism). The character of this handful of impudent writers, he says in another criticism, brought up in English behaviour cannot be the character of the nation.

Against modern writers' recourse to Freudianism, Benudhar Sarma, one of our renowned critic and creative writers, pits his appeal to a 'Brahmachārya' in literature. He considers sexual realism an imposition on our unresponsive tradition and urges the writers to follow a Brahmachārya, i.e., a classical ideal to eradicate the vice of free sex from literature."

Hem Barua, one of our great poets denounces obscenity in literature in a learned article. The article contains no mentioning of Freud or his psycho-analysis but is not without indication that Freudianism is responsible for the abundance of sex in fiction and for the causation of present social anxiety. While he stresses the difficulty of defining obscenity in literature and the risk of obstructing the publication of obscene literature by legal imposition, he approves free environment as the condition, requisite for great literature. Again while he denounces obscenity in literature, he points out that the impression of obscenity can be wiped out by an artistic representation of sex, the point which has been stressed by all our critics denouncing the application of the psychological discoveries regarding sex, as a remedy.

In a letter to the editor, Sashi Sarma writes that modern literary venture in the exploration of tabooed sex prognosticates no good to life. Literature is inconceivable in the absence of the sexual problems of life. But sexual science and sexual literature, he continues, are two different things. A literature, bent on transforming the theory of science is no literature; it is a caricature of literature only. Nakedness is not foreign to human civilisation, and to literature as well. But literature, even when it aims at sexual profusion or profligacy should be able to discipline sex

through art into delight, which is the aim of all ideal literature. Sex, thus turned into artistic delight is not banal sex, that excites desire or creates tension, but 'rasa' (sentiment) or divine delight that releases man of tension or subdue his passion.

In another letter written in reaction against Homen Bargohain's "Asamīyā Sāhityat Navayuga", referred to earlier in the chapter one of our minor writers ascribes the present fall in sexual equilibrium in Assamese society to the sex-centred fictions of Malik, Sada Saikiya, Kumar Kishore, Homen Bargohain and others. What more can we expect than an aura of unholiness about these obscene fictions? he questions.

All the critics, major and minor of the use of psycho-analysis in our literature have been of opinion that the indiscreet use of sex has really been an imposition on our fiction, for, it is offensive to the tradition. The psychology of sex and neurosis has, no doubt, widened the scope of literature. Assamese writers have gone too far in the choice of subject and technique beyond the bounds of tradition. The heaps of new materials have enhanced the significance and sweetness of our fiction, but this has been achieved only at the elimination of our national character from literature. Instead of disciplining society and instructing it, the new literature has only instigated the readers to feel strongly about other things (i.e., about the violation of the moral taboos) to the

detriment of their health and delight, which our traditional
literature was accustomed to beget. It is a moral
responsibility of a writer to aim at regenerating society. But
regeneration does not, of course, mean freely or impertinently
exposing the seamy side of the respectable social life.
Progressivism does not mean distorting the real or making it
appear awkward. No responsible writer should destroy our family
relationships in blind imitations of foreign ideals. Our
brother-in-law, sister-in-law, son-in-law are free from any
touch of sex or obscenity in their affection and endearment.
Psycho-analysis of these relationships would cause serious harm
to the peaceful equilibrium of our social and normal life. A
writer should choose plots for his stories from the society, of
which he is a responsible member. Even when he imagines a plot
in imitation of a foreign model he should be discreet enough to
forbear patterning his characters on the foreign model. Some
of our realistic fictions seem more fictional even than the old
romances. Realism exceeds the bounds of romance when a writer
takes to indicate the evening sky through a manstruating woman
or a woman in labour, and compares the morning rays of the sun
to the blood-spots of a woman in her monthly course. To write
against tradition does not virtually mean writing something
novel or progressive. No responsible writer should treat sex as
representative of modern realism. Taking it as such is like
taking the shadow or dream to represent the man. Such a writing

8. Priyanath Das Talukdar, "Ramdhenu Galpa Sahitya", Ramdhenu,
Vol. IX, No. 8, 1878 saka.
only serves the purpose of self-indulgence; does not instruct or edify.  

A long article of some merit by Amal Chandra Goswami criticises the Freudians for the rude change they have brought in the life of our society. Equipped with a superficial knowledge of psycho-analysis, - its id and libido specifically, these writers seem crazy in the pursuit of sexual release of their fictional persons, caring little for its consequence on the readers. Like Freud they hold that the suppression of sex lies at the root of all human abnormalities, and demonstrate gratification of sexual desire as the cure from these diseases through their persons. In their psycho-analytic sympathy for the persons, they only suggest means of instinctual gratification; and very rarely of retribution or punishment even when punishment is usually deserving on social consideration.

Shri Goswami argues that Freudianism aught to be rejected on ground of the ambivalence it has created in the aim and ideal of literature. If sex-centred literature, - literature which explains the minute details of sexual life - kisses, embraces, amorous sights of men and women, the nature and behaviour of their coituses and what not? - be the criterion of great literature on grounds of its popularity, then a considerable portion of the great literature would be deprived of its due. We


must not be optimistic, Shri Goswami concludes, about the survival of a literature, which seeks to sprout and grow like fungus on the grave of a religiously, culturally and even philosophically self-sufficient tradition.

In a small article Jamiruddin Ahmed calls the sex-centred novels as parasite on our pure tradition and warns the young readers against their being infected. A good novel, he says, inspires us to activity and idealism, but a bad one deprives us of individuality and ideals and paralyses us into utter inactivity.11

In a long and searching article, Ramani Sarma criticises Freudianism on grounds of its materialistic preoccupation. Literary applications of psycho-analysis with its exclusive stress on sex as the leading motive is, in his consideration, a parasitic overcharge on our spiritual inheritance.12

The upholders of Freudian psychology are generally the creative writers, most of whom have won credit as writers of fictions, long and short. They regard Marxism and Freudianism as two grand phenomena, and consider the literary application of them - inevitable. It is, of course, not unnatural that some of the writers here as in elsewhere would in their first unqualified enthusiasm, prefer one until patience, experience


12. Ramani Kanta Sarma, "Sāhitya Aloohana Cakrar Sahāpatir Abhijñāsan (Speech of the President of the Literary Discussion Circle).
and insight convince them to worm their ways to the other. We have, as a matter of fact, more writers than one who have been Freudian first, and critics of Freudianism next - leaving one in preference of the other, like Manik Bandopadhyaya in our neighbouring Bengali fiction.

The views of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, one of our most popular writers have been almost similar to that of Bandopadhyaya in his creative writings and criticism. He is one of the writers who adores our tradition without a conservative leaning towards it. Most of his writings have, I think, grown in an attempt at assimilating the old values with the new. His liberal attitude is evident in his modest rejection of Benudhar Sarma's insistence on the Modern Assamese writers' following a classical ideal, - 'Brahmachārya' as he calls it. In consideration of the progress our literature has made in the different directions, particularly in fictions, he argues, Shri Sarma's criticism is not acceptable as criterion of judgment in to-day's situation. Literatures elsewhere, have been up and doing in adjusting man to the new situation, created by the occurrence of the wars and the improvement of science. We have, therefore, no reason, he continues, to rot or riot in vain allegiance to a traditional ideal, based on the conservatism of an age. The ideal that Sankardeva evolved for his religious literature was ignored or disregarded by his contemporary poet, Piyambar on ground of its denial of life. The gap between Sankardeva and us is even greater than that between Shakespeare and Emile Zola or Maupassant. This gap is not bridgeable by a mere allegiance to a religious ideal.
A sentimental approach, such as this, would enable a writer to achieve nothing, and would only stand an impediment in the path of achieving universal literature.

Ours is a period of experiment, Shri Bhattacharya argues, not of judging what is good and what is bad. Two groups of writers have, he points out, been experimenting in two different directions—the psychological (Freudian) and sociological (Marxian). The former works in conflict of the mind against the environment for an individual's readjustment, and the latter, for a socio-economic equilibrium. Both, however, deal with the ordinariness of life against the romantic complexity and extravagance, classical simplicity and restraint and medieval renunciation and resignation of life. Realism and progressivism, the two terms, he explains, indicate freedom of thought and experience, and need a radical change of the whole social pattern for a proper functioning of science and experiences, he concludes.

Though Shri Bhattacharya suggests in his article\(^\text{13}\) nothing against the inevitability of Freudianism, his preference as a creative writer weighs towards a sociological ideal of literature.

In two other editorials,\(^\text{14}\) Shri Bhattacharya expresses the inadequacy of romanticism in general and of Assamese


romanticism in particular. He does not question the inevitability of Freudian psychology, with the application of which the second phase of our romanticism began; but makes it responsible for reducing love and spiritualism into the psycho-analytic libido, and suggests Kristopher Cadwell's ideas of love as the proper basis of our future literature.

In another article, Shri Bhattacharya argues in favour of a free discussion of sex in art and literature, and for the overthrow of legal imposition on the literary exposition of it. The Lady Chatterley's Lover of D.H. Lawrence, he states, was banned by a verdict of the Supreme Court on ground that the book was "too phallic for the gross public (as it was interpreted to have broken the 292 Section of the Penal Code). The verdict of the Supreme Court stirred up a swarm of reactions among the intellectuals. Shri Bhattacharya quotes the reaction of Dr. Mulukraj Anand who said that the verdict would set a limit to any public discussion on sex, and particularly on the literary explanations of the real relationships between men and women; and with this, he continues, a large part of women's freedom in society would be curtailed. Besides, it would incur a great loss to Indian literature. The Indian people would be deprived of the enjoyment of the great works of art and literature.

Shri Bhattacharya states that Dr. Mulukraj Anand is justified, and continues that the time is ripe for uncovering the traditional reticence on sex. He urges the critics of literature to effect a clear explanation of the word 'obscenoe'
before literature is made to suffer from an aesthetic loss in its deprivation of sex by a legal enforcement. Literary discussion of sex is not disagreeable to aestheticism, he concludes.

In warm support of Homen Barghain's article mentioned earlier some of our minor writers, while they have warned against low obscene venture, have encouraged the urgency of venture for the achievement of great literature. Homen Barghain's Subālā has been mentioned as a great achievement in fiction (long) in its abundance of sex. Sex here is properly disciplined and is no source of displeasure. Homer's 'making man glad', Aristotle's 'pleasure', Coleridge's 'complacency', Schiller's 'joy' and Longinuse's 'ecstasy' are the different forms of artistic delight achieved out of disciplined sex.¹⁵

It is, however, pointed out that the exercise of venture is dependable on the economic and social environment, of which our writers are pathetically deprived. Economic conditions straiten the Assamese writers into poverty, and social environment into suffocation, both being detrimental to sound health and freedom of experience.¹⁶

We have a number of articles written in defense of Homen Barghain's article and Malik's famous short story Vibhatsa Bedanā by our minor writers. These articles even in their access of passion and pursuasion are full of arguments

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¹⁵ Danbaru Gogol, "Sampādakaloicithi", Mavayuga, 1st yr., No. 6.
¹⁶ Ibid.
and information and can be summarised to establish our point.

The predominance of sex in literatures of the last two centuries is consequent without doubt upon the new knowledge explored by Freud and his followers. The literary use of this knowledge is inevitable; but our writers should be warned against distorting literature in imitation of cheap models. The great writers in all ages have demonstrated the tragedy of all instinctual cravings. Balzac's Venial Sin, King's Sweetheart, Fair Impiria, Pretty Maid of Partilon, Zola's Nana, Human Beast, Teressa, La Curre, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, Pearl Buck's The Good Earth, Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment etc. were once criticised for their sexual exuberance.

But sex or solution of sexual problems in these novels is deterrent neither to social nor to individual interest. Love between a mother and her step son (as in Zola's La Curre) looks immoral but not unreal. The Rénis and the Namas have no long life to live. The death of Nana who sold sex for money, and that of Réni who sacrificed life for illicit love are lessons for us to learn. The abundance of sex in Dostoevsky's novel is not for a luxury of indulgence, i.e., for creating the juggeting of untruth. His novels are quests of truth. Dostoevsky was no shallow preacher. His women are forced to atone at the call of reality, not on religious or moral imposition from without. The ugly, loathsome story of a whore cannot excite concupiscence in a sound reader; it moves him with sympathy and warns against the pursuit of impulsive gratification. She is no appeal, but a warning.
Malik's Bibhatsa Bedana is readable and even worth imitating on the same ground. Padma and Uma in the story are abnormal women, although only attempt at identifying them on the basis of a psycho-analytic theory of abnormality is apt to fail. Even if Malik was influenced by Freud in the characterisation of the two women (there is no doubt that he was), there is nothing wrong about it, for, Freidianism taught him to face reality boldly and even dexterously. If Bibhatsa Bedana, Kalé Dēwarar Cāp, Jahārā, Jūraj are rejected on grounds of obscenity, it is hard to imagine how our readers would enjoy reading The Good Earth, and Sanctuary of William Faulkner.

Art and morality are two things. If morality is allowed to establish its domain on reality, art will get paralised. The great writers of the world overthrew this domain on reality and directed their quest to a perfection of life, that glows in fusion of art and life. Lawrence termed this perfection of art and life 'divine otherness'; Huxley experienced a 'divine mystery' in the physical union of lovers. What did the great Sanskrit poets and the medieval religious poets achieve in 'rasa' if not something like this? Is it not perfection of life, won in conglomeration of art and love?

Assamese fiction is poor in the physical description of man's sexual life. Malik's Bibhatsa Bedanā is a mile-post in the line.

The reign of the Mahāpuruṣas (i.e., the God-incarnated who, preoccupied in the idea of 'bhakti' remained content in the godliness of men, and used to dislike art and life itself)
being over, we have leisure to rediscover human nature. The exposition of sex in literature is not in the opinion of these writers a violation of taboo as it was considered by our religious writers, nor is it a symptom of disease. It is, in truth, the "rediscovery of nature". The last two centuries pushed the essential nature of man into artificialities. The present age is the time for eradicating life and sex out of these artificialities. The process of rediscovery would, of course, entail the labour of removing dregs. The first feeling of loathsome character in the treatment of anything in relation to sex is due to the dregs. Few days after, it is hoped, this ugly confoundment, half seen, half hidden would disappear, and we would learn to worship sex with a surprise in the way we are accustomed to worship the sun just out of the clouds.

We have very little, indeed, now to add to the chapter, which is already too long. As for the despisers of sex, I am impressed that what they have said about Freud's discoveries of sex and their literary application, and what they have argued in favour of a 'Brahmacharya' in consideration of social peace and national integrity is most genuinely and wisely said, although they are themselves convinced that they have said something in the manner of a preacher in an age where they have few people to listen. These critics believe firmly and even sincerely in the existence of an ideal sexual tradition in ancient literature, which taught men to subdue sexual desires instead of rousing them. In their idolatry for it, and insistence on its continuation, they make modern psychology responsible for all obscene and immoral, material exuberance
in the new realism.

The upholders of the new realism, most of whom are our creative writers, on the other hand, are sceptical about any such ideal as could suit the literary requirement of today. And in consideration of what has been up around them in the bounds of civilisation, particularly in that of literature, they feel it urgent for freely and fearlessly exposing any problem, pornographic or puritanical, if it concerns man as an individual and as a member of the society. They hold themselves responsible to tell the truth about life, without caring much to consider if it delights or disgruntle the audience. Their art grows undoubtedly out of life, is fed by life. But their responsibility seems to end in exposition of how life appears to them against a particular situation, which environs it. These realists concern themselves with the psychic part of life. Life - as an ideal whole, i.e., life with its roots beyond life is without the scope of their art. As a matter of fact, their art, while it dissects life, does not bear the responsibility to see how it bleeds. Modern science and their own situation of life have taught them to disregard any moral or ethical responsibility to it. No national and traditional outlook profit them as they are convinced, any way in their situation. It is a life without order, integrity, without anything heroic in it. And to depict it, they bare art of any 'ideal in form and spirit. They mock at those who display a passionate leaning to the past.
But neither the despisers of modern sexual realism, nor the weak supporters of it are free of a romantic illusionment. Both sets are victims of two infantile disorders of more or less same nature - one of regression and the other of aggression.

Literature has long ago been invaded by the new forces, and the reign has been established firmly. Our creative writers have marched far along the exploration of the new possibilities, and have got audience ever on the increase to accept as natural whatever is presented. None has leisure, as it were, to look back. The question if what is being done was done by our distant predecessors, if what is being done partakes of the characteristic spirit of the nation seems to be rationalised away. I think the critics who now cry for national literature, ethical or moral and aesthetic responsibility of the modern writers are only Lamas living safe in a spiritual fortress when Tibet has already been declared a foreign land.

It is too late of us indeed to question the inevitability of Freudianism. Psycho-analysis as a science of regulating the mind, - the human relationships is a cultural need in to-day's civilisation. If psycho-analysis cannot settle the emotional problems of life none else can. What is amiss is not with psycho-analysis as it is, but with psycho-analysis as it has been made to operate. The new discoveries have been applied in literature as a 'curiosity', i.e., as a "desire after the things of the mind simply for their own sake and for the pleasure of seeing them as they are", which looks
in practice somewhat "frivolous and unedifying". The social motives, i.e., the love and sympathy for the patient, "the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing human miseries" are often ignored in it. To heal the wounded the literary artist should stress on analysis rather than on exposition.