CHAPTER V

NARRATING AMBIVALENCE AND IDENTITY

When the form of the novel was said to have been 'imported' into the colonies in the nineteenth century, it was only a century or so old in its place of origin. The novel was groping to find a perfect form and was still going through processes of transition. Several recent works have tried to analyze the reason why the novel came to become the most favoured literary genre to be appropriated into the literary psyche of colonized nations. As Timothy Brennan puts it,

"It was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the 'one, yet many' of national life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles. Socially, the novel joined the newspaper as the major vehicle of the national print media, helping to standardize language, encourage literacy, and remove mutual incomprehensibility. But it did much more than that. Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation."

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The issue that begs questioning here is, does imagining the nation and writing the novel happen in simultaneous space and time? If they are "national allegories" as Frederic Jameson says\(^2\), then both the novel and the nation engage in a discourse, which sees the collapse of old structures and the emergence of new ones. As outcomes of colonial modernity, the creation of the novel and the nation can be seen as occupying "empty, homogenous time"\(^3\) and as the means of representing new truths about collective as well as individual identities. The problematisation of the concept of "simultaneity" is imperative for an understanding of both the genesis of the novel and the nation for simultaneity tells us of events, imagined and real, in a babel of voices and languages, through the twin grids of temporality and spatiality and measured in the exactitudes of "clock and calendar".\(^4\) The awareness of various realities as also the desire to conflate this plurality into homogeneity, into one verifiable truth of the nation and the novel makes us see the leaps of imagination which model both these two ideas.

Although the novel, just like the idea of nationalism, was from very early on, talked about as an alien, Western introduction, which, however found fertile soil and grew unfettered in the colonies; it would be of interest to

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\(^3\) Benedict Anderson, p.24.

\(^4\) Ibid.
these ideas came to be reconfigured in spaces outside Europe. The cliché of the novel being a purely Western concept is explained with proper emendations by Leela Gandhi –

"The emerging consensus on post colonial literary practice has it that the most radical anti-colonial writers are 'mimic men', whose generic misappropriations constantly transgress the received and orthodox boundaries of 'literariness'. Accordingly, the paradigmatic moment of anti-colonial counter-textuality is seen to begin with the most indecorous mixing of western genres with local content. By this reasoning, anti-colonial texts become political when, for instance, the formal shape of the European novel is moulded to indigenous realities, or when the measured sound of English is accented by an unrecognisable babel of native voices."\(^5\)

So the 'hybridization' of a literary genre in the radically charged colonial space 'politicises' the genre and prepares it to 'write back' to the colonizer. The concept of "colonial mimicry"\(^6\) can be used to read the (mis), appropriation of the novel by colonial writers as a subtle subversion of colonial rules. The form can be copied and then twisted out of recognition, a signifier of respectful imitation as well as of defiant disobedience. So new

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forms of knowledge and new hierarchies of power are produced after the colonial vocabulary is translated into anti-colonial usage.

Meenakshi Mukherjee, in the introduction to *Early Novels in India*, questions the validity of a universal paradigm for novel-writing and refutes the assumption that all long narratives written in the nineteenth century which followed the European model, could be designated as novels or ‘not-yet’ novels. She writes that –

"The assumption that the novel in India was nothing but a borrowed genre – a direct outcome of English education introduced in the nineteenth century by the British rulers – had remained unquestioned for a long time … (one needs) to re-examine that clichéd premise and address the complex question of plural heritage – both local and derived from other cultures – and the multiplicity of other determinants that interacted and fused to make the emergence of this literary form a tangled process in India … the process was diverse and heterogenous even within the country, depending on the specific historical variables, cultural geography and narrative genealogy of each linguistic region."\(^7\)

The heterogenous genesis of the Indian novel, written in diverse languages and with the help of diverse literary traditions cannot be said to either easily conform to or deviate from the form of the Western Novel. In

\(^7\) Meenakshi Mukherjee (ed.), *Early Novels in India*, Sahitya Akademi, Delhi, 2002, p.viii.
Assam, the evolution of the novel was also very complex, hampered as it was by the already 'perfect' Bengali novel in such close proximity. So it will not come as a surprise to see that while the Western form may be said to have been 'imitated', the content, by and large, had a great affinity with the Bengali novel. Novelists like Bankim Chandra were revered and imitated with abandon.

The Assamese novel began with such works as Podmobotí Debí Phu’kônôni’s Xudhormor Upākhyān in 1884. As a 'novel' written by a woman, it gained wide popularity; but it was more or less, a moral fable written to tell women about womanly virtues. Monuromā, the heroine of the story, is the epitome of sacrifice and devotion. In spite of having a worthless husband, she serves and worships him and in the end is rewarded by his repentance.

Some six years after Xudhormor Upākhyān three novels were published; Lokhināth Bezborua’s Podum Kāv’rî (1890) and Podmônâth Guhāîn Boruā’s Bhānumotí (1891) and Lāhôrî (1892). All these three novels are very similar going by the facts of being framed in historical pasts, their treatment of love, the awareness of class and caste fragmentations. The three heroes are all orphans and live in the heroines’ homes giving them ample opportunity to meet, converse and exchange glances; which would otherwise have been
impossible. The heroes seem to reflect the anxiety of the authors' times. The breakdown of societal boundaries in the name of love was an idea that was being hotly debated and we see both Bezborua and Guhain Borua conform to the ideal of a happy family life. Bhānumoti and Podum Kūrī end in tragedy because of this very reason but Lāhori, ends happily in marital bliss because the hero's noble lineage is discovered and Lāhori, the passionate young woman is converted into a devoted and tame wife in the final chapter.

The novel that I wish to discuss here was first published in 1894. Rojonikānta Bordoloi's novel of a young Mirī couple, Mirī Jīyori tells of love in an adivasi village in Assam. Bordoloi had graduated from Calcutta University and had also been closely associated with the ncionia Bhāxā Unnōti Xādhōni Xōbhā. At the time of writing his novels, he worked as a Government Official in various places in the Province. Indeed, he was also entrusted with the task of collecting historical and ethnographic material for Gait's History of Assam by Gait himself. This experience stood him in good stead when he wrote his novels especially his first, Mirī Jīyori, which shows a very keen eye for the details of 'tribal' custom. A famous name in literary criticism in Assam, Birinchi Kumar Barua, had this to say about Rojonikānta Bordoloi in 1957.

* The Mirīs are now known as Misīns.
"Influenced by Sir Walter Scott and possessing the same pure relish for the charm of the way-side the ringing humour and infectious vivacity as did Scott and the great Bengali novelist, Bankim Chandra – Bordoloi took up his pen to portray Assamese history and social conditions in a critical period of her national existence."

In an utterly innocuous manner, Barua very vividly shows us what a nineteenth century Assamese novelist aspired to. The influences of Scott and Bankim Chandra on Rejonikānto Bordoloi are mentioned so as to accord prestige to this son of the soil. But it is not as if Barua's comments have dated. In a recent piece, Tilottama Misra writes,

"In his novels, Bordoloi tries to draw an authentic picture of popular life which, according to Lukacs, is constituted by a complex interaction between the 'above' and the 'below' of society. Like Scott he shows that though the leading role in historical events is played by the ruling classes, ordinary people's lives are also transformed by these events ... Bordoloi portrays the lives of these people with a genuinely sympathetic touch which is quite unusual for a middle class Assamese writer of his days. In his attempt to create authentic local colour, he portrays village girls moving around freely,

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singing, dancing, drinking home-brewed liquor with their companions in the festive Bihu seasons."

The analysis may have become more sophisticated, the criticism may be subtler than what Barua had to say, but the emphasis on Scott's influence still survives. I also wish to carefully examine Bordoloi's 'much talked about "sympathy" for the lower classes, the lower castes, the 'tribes'. For this purpose, I will make a close reading of his first and most popular novel. *Miri Jiyori* is the tale of two young Miri lovers, Jońki and Pānéi, who like most young lovers, lead difficult star-crossed lives. Jońki is an orphan and Pānéi, the only child of her old parents. The novel begins when they are children and Jońki saves Pānéi from a bear. We meet them again in the second chapter as young dancers making merry during the *Bifhu* festival. Five years have elapsed and Pānéi is now fourteen, a fair, pretty damsel whose dancing reminds one of heavenly nymphs. In the first chapter itself, in very long explanatory footnotes, Bordoloi tells his readers about the *Miri* community— their beginnings, beliefs, social customs etc. In the first footnote he writes—

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7 Tilottama Misra, "Early Asamiya Novels" in Meenakshi Mukherjee (ed.). *Early Novels in India*, pp.23-4.

10 I have used two versions of *Miri Jiyori*, (i) The original Assamese version and (ii) The most recent English translation.


"The Miris today form a part of the Assamese society. Though they have different dialects, they all speak Assamese. They put on dresses in the manner of the Assamese, some of them have also adopted Hinduism... the Miris used bulls and buffaloes in their worship and ate their flesh. But because of their contact with the Hindus in the plains, they have abandoned this practice.\textsuperscript{11}

Throughout the novel, we see Bordoloi telling his readers directly, or through his characters, how the Miris were fast moving towards 'becoming Assamese'. Jońki cannot even bear to see Pânéi in the clothes of an Adivasi woman\textsuperscript{12} and the very sight of her dressed in a loin-cloth fills his eyes with tears.

The story of Miri Jiyori is simple enough. Pânéi's parents want her to marry Kômūd, the son of a rich and important man in their village. Their greed for money blinds them since among the Miris, the custom of paying bride-price prevailed. Unable to face their taunts, she runs away with Jonki but is brought back. One day she hears her father conspiring to hand her over to Kômūd, bound hand and foot, and she runs away again. Her repentant parents ask Jońki to go in search of her but both are captured by the barbaric

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., pp.2-3.

\textsuperscript{12} "Pânéi, once clothed in lovely rihā and mēkhēla made of mūg2 silk which pleased his sight, was now dressed in the meagre loin cloth of a gacchi woman." p.53.
hill—Miris. They are caught talking to each other one day and are beaten up, tortured and killed.

This short novel, however, gives Bordi ample opportunity to give us comprehensive and thorough details about the Miri community. He leaves no stoned unturned when he wants to tell his precious readers about the exotic customs of this 'tribal' group. Customs like bride-price etc. excite his ethnographic self and he enumerates the minutest specificities. The simplicity and the stubbornness of the Miris as character traits are also mentioned time and again. They are portrayed as stereotypically ignorant and superstitious. Various rites and rituals with Deodhais mumbling in an ancient tongue, which nobody understands, are very colourfully described. Sometimes he also uses colonial sources in order to legitimise his own observations.14

The colonial interventions in his novel are very interesting because they take the form of quotations from two famous poets in the beginning of important chapters. Oliver Goldsmith and Robert Burns are quoted in chapters III and chapter XII respectively. Although they seem somewhat out

13 "The reader here will be able to know in this book about the matrimonial practices of the Miris. They take an amount of three score to two to three hundred rupees as bride-price. In addition, the would-be son-in-law has to stay with the would-be in-laws and offer them his labour for two years." p.22.

14 "In Hunter's Statistical Account, it is remarked thus, 'They have a region which is the abode of all their gods and from whose bourne no traveller returns'. It can be surmised from the Deodhais mention of rēgi rēgām that he has been possessed by the spirits of pāṅkēyā and pāṃeyā." – pp.14-15.
of context, the sudden appearance of English poetry in a novel about two *Miri* lovers creates a sense of dysjuncture and of unease.

Bordoloi's feelings about the *Bifju* festival is also worth a mention. He seemed to have been utterly in favour of celebrating the *Bifju* and we see Joñki and Pānēi's love flowering during the festivities. They dance and sing together, meet alone, talk about their feelings for each other, all very impossible fantasies for a young Assamese couple in the late nineteenth century, as the novels discussed earlier, prove. In the preface to his novel, in which he dedicates the novel to a Bengali friend, he writes —"This innocent *Miri* daughter of mine has not learnt to sing *boriali* songs in the latest style. She could sing songs only in *Miri* or lisp a few *Bifju* songs when she felt sad. That is the reason, my brother, for including those songs in this book. Though they have been stained by the name of *Bifju*, I know you like them. Do not accuse me of having bad taste. Young girls do not sing obscene *Bifju* songs, and even if they do, I cannot help it."  

The *Miris* are shown as being extremely close to nature. They are cheerful, fun-loving, healthy and simple. They are also shown as being very passionate and uncontrolled. Both Pānēi and Joñki beat their breasts, bite their

15 Ibid., p.(ii).

16"The mother river loves the simple *Miris* who have descended from the hills more than the Assamese people of the plains." p.2.
flesh and scratch themselves given the least opportunity. They drink and sing
when they are happy, fight like savages when angry and generally behave in
ways, which would seem alien to a middle-class Assamese ‘gentleman’.

Pānēi ’s father, Tāmēd, specially behaves in ways, which seem strange for a
father. He once tells his daughter that when Kōmūd will violate her chastity
by force, she would have to submit to him and in another instance, he
connives with Kōmūd to hand a bound Pānēi over to him. Bordoloi also
shows Pānēi smoking and drinking with a stranger. This Miri dandy who
wore shoes, kept his hair neat and drank imported wine is caricatured as
someone who had had a little learning (he had passed the lower primary
examination) and was too big for his boots. After drinking with her, he loses
his control and lunges at her. His attempt to rape Pānēi is however foiled
because Pānēi is young and strong and is able to fight him. The point that
ought to be noted is, no Assamese author, writing about a nineteenth century
upper-class Assamese heroine would have shown her smoking and drinking.

It is only because Pānēi is ‘tribal’ that Bordoloi takes such liberties with her
characterisation. Even her language is sometimes uncouth. Although she
sings sweet love songs most of the time, Bordoloi makes her speak in a
manner which would have offended the sensibilities of his nineteenth century
readership. For instance, when she runs away for the first time, she tells her
parents that she has to relieve herself. The English translation says, "she
hoodwinked her parents by telling her parents that she was going to answer the call of nature."\textsuperscript{17} But the Assamese original does not use any such euphemisms. Pânéi leaves her house in order to defecate and the original Assamese word does not leave any room for doubt.

Within the novel itself, we see some Assamese \textit{Bābus} who come to enjoy the \textit{Bifù} dances of the \textit{Miris}. They pay for their entertainment, sometimes sit as judges in the dance competitions or engage in some light flirtations with the young girls. For them, the \textit{Miris} are a colourful, exotic, permissive people who are patently different from themselves. The only English character in the novel, the magistrate, is, however, drawn very sympathetically. He is, like Bordoloi, "well-versed in the laws and practices of the hills tribes like the \textit{ôkās} and the \textit{Dojīs}, and also those of the plains like the \textit{Miris} and the \textit{Deuris}".\textsuperscript{18} He is impartial, just and popular but he cannot really control the Pânéi -Jonki affair because although people did approach the court for settlements, most cases were resolved outside the authority of colonial law.

This discussion of Bordoloi's novel seems to clarify certain ideological stances. The Assamese writings of his times mentioned in unembarrassed ways, the inferiority of the several hill and plain 'tribes' who lived in and

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p.38.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p.41.
around Assam. Although, towards the beginning of the twentieth century, certain efforts were made to forge a homogenous Assamese identity, united with the adivasi identities, the efforts did not really bear fruit. Their languages were always seen as dialects of Assamese, their customs and practices, curious and exotic, their characters unformed and immature. Although Bordoloi's novel seems objective and 'realistic', his sympathies, which get talked about all the time, are questionable. The subconscious awareness of the Miri's inferior social as well as civilizational status colours his writing and we receive a fascinatingly distorted and ambiguous understanding of an Assamese Officer's rendering of a 'tribal' tale.

Before I end this chapter, I wish to point out certain features, which make Bordoloi's novel interesting, from the point of view of appreciating the early form of the novel in colonial spaces. Miri Jiyori is full of very extensive and long-winded footnotes. They sometimes take up more space on the page than the actual text of the story. The notes, which make the novel, look more like ethnography, sometimes become jarring and break the flow of the tale. But Bordoloi definitely seems to think them important and necessary for the telling of his story. Miri Jiyori is also full of Bihu songs, some seductive, some sad, some purely happy; once, even a song on the East India Company's boats, is sung. These songs appear at regular intervals and again, seem to break the prose structure of the novel but they also obviously add to the
movement and the mood of the story. Another attractive and engaging introduction in his novel is that almost all the conversations appear on the page as dramatic dialogues. For instance an exchange between Pānēi and Joṅki is written thus:

"Pānēi: 'So, you'll be going away, Joṅki?'

Joṅki: 'It can't be helped, Pānēi. Kōmūd bears a grudge against me these days. Since I live at his house, he uses foul words against me and hurts me.'

Pānēi: 'Won't you come here again?'

Joṅki: 'I shall, once in a while. I will enquire about you.'

Pānēi: 'You must come. I will be unhappy without you.'

Joṅki: 'I, too, shall lead a lonely life. I feel helpless. Fortune has not favoured us, I'm afraid."19

The effective histrionic use of this method tells us that Bordoloi, as an early practitioner of the craft of the novel, in a subject-colony, was still playing with its form. Just as his content is formed by the 'historical variables' of the space that he occupied, the formal space of the European novel is 'moulded to his indigenous realities'.

19 Ibid., p.29.