



Ideological representation of labour of the tea tribes in *Seuji Patar Kahini* and *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*

Dr. Shivajit Dutta

Department of English,
Doomdooma College, Rupai Siding, Tinsukia, Assam, India

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Dr. Shivajit Dutta

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Abstract

Seuji Patar Kahini and *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* are generally taken for labour-oriented novels based on the life of the tea tribes in Assam. But close analysis reveals that the labour of the tea tribes in Assam is not adequately represented in both novels and the point of entry of each of them is also not adequately based on the said labour. This inadequacy of representation of labour is caused by the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology. The artist's faithful dedication to her art sometimes enables her to transcend her class ideology but such transcendence of ideology by art could not be noticed in the selected novels. Each of them somewhat addresses the interlinked issues of labour, alienated labour, exploitation, and struggle, but ultimately dilutes these issues, deviates from them, diverts them, and suppresses them only to serve the ideology of the mainstream Assamese middle class.

Keywords: Labour, Over-determined, Point-of-entry, ideology, Assamese, Tea Tribes.

What is important in the work is what it does not say-*Pierre Macherey*

Introduction

This study begins with the proposition that the fundamental subject of fiction is man. "However various the données of literature, the basic question is, and will remain: what is Man?" (Lukács, *Contemporary* 19). Man is distinguished from other animals by free, conscious, and creative labour which is the human essence. This essential humanity is lost when labour is forced and alienated. So, ideally,

a novel in general and a labour-oriented novel in particular, should address the issues of creative and alienated labour to fulfill its purpose of delineating the "just and lively image of the human nature" (Dryden para. 11). But if a novel retreats from doing just that or does that in a very limited or deformed way, it must be concluded that the novel serves the cause of some ideology. Besides, the creative man creates social processes along with material objects and keeps creating and complicating them throughout history and thus gives rise to an over-determined social reality that cannot be

comprehensively perceived without a vantage point, that is, a point of entry. But if the main subject of all art including fiction is no other than man, and man's essence is free, conscious, and creative labour, then, ideally, the point of entry of a novel should address creative and/or alienated labour. If a novel does not take up creative and/or alienated labour or some story thread that represents it as the point of entry, it must be the consequence of some ideological impact on the novel. It is more so in the case of a labour-oriented novel. This impact of ideology will not be limited to the delineation of labour or the choice of the point of entry; it will impact many other aspects of a novel, more particularly on formal aspects which are directly related to the content of labour and are like the choice of the hero and the heroine, the portrayal of labour unions and their activities, amount of space given to the working class characters, delineation of the scenes at workplaces, the beginning and the end of a novel, etc. In order to examine such impacts of ideology I have arbitrarily selected two Assamese novels, namely, *Seuji Patar Kahini* and *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*.

Since the Assamese novel is a product of the Assamese middle class and since the former reached its pinnacle in the period when the latter consolidated itself as the most dominant power of the state, it is logical to think that the latter's ideology will have a considerable impact on the former's content and form. Sometimes it is seen in the history of literature that authors can transcend their class ideology and thus represent social reality more adequately. Dostoevsky, for instance, wanted to advocate for Christian moral principles as opposed to revolutionary idealism in *Crime and Punishment* (1867) but ended up drawing the readers' sympathy towards the "sinful" hero and the cause of the revolution. Balzac, despite his skepticism about emerging capitalism and his loyalty to the aristocracy, could not but depict the historically inevitable downfall of the aristocracy and the gradual rise of the bourgeois

capitalist class. Lukács poignantly comments, "It is precisely this discrepancy between intention and performance, between Balzac the political thinker and Balzac the author ... that constitutes Balzac's historical greatness" (*Studies* 21). Further, "However biased Balzac may have been in favour of the nobility, he saw quite clearly the inevitability of its extinction, nor did he fail to see its internal decadence" (40). Such triumph of art over ideology has not been noticed in the selected Assamese novels; they very easily succumb to the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology. So, labour is represented from the point of view of this class, artistic means are employed to envelope alienated labour as far as possible, and class struggle is often marginalised or suppressed, or forgotten under the pressure of other themes the middle class is fond of. The opportunity to make labour the point of entry of the over-determined textual reality is shunned by each of the novels. The David of the Marxian imagination is comfortably beaten by the Goliath of the liberal imagination.

Objectives

This study proposes to examine the impact of the ideology of the mainstream Assamese middle class in the selected novels' representation of labour in general and alienated and creative labour in particular of the tea tribes. Further, it wants to explore the relationship between that ideology and the points of entry chosen by the selected novels to represent an over-determined reality. It will also examine how Marxian and Liberal imaginations influence the making of the novels and the extent to which that ideology shapes them.

Research Methodology

Close reading of the primary sources, that is, the selected novels is made. This reading involves paying special attention to the major tropes involved in the theoretical scaffolding of this research study. As has been mentioned earlier, these specific tropes are related to labour (creative and alienated), ideology, over-

determination, and point of entry. It is needless to mention that considerations relating to class, nationalism, polity, etc. will also form part of the discussion in the close reading of the texts.

Ways of Representing Labour

Labour is abstract and it finds its exposition and existence through the labourers who are concrete entities. Priority given to labour, therefore, gets expressed through priority given to the labourers. In fiction, one way of giving this priority is to draw the hero and the heroine from the ranks of the labourers. Does it happen in the selected novels? A true working-class hero or heroine that remains so throughout is nowhere to be found. If a few of them are from the working class they change either class or ideology or both before the conclusion of the novel.

Another way of prioritising labour in a novel is to foreground the issue of labour making it the dominant thread among all the story threads of the plot. But, despite the conspicuous potential of alienated labour in the plots the selected novels have not taken labour or alienated labour as their dominant threads or points of entry.

Impact of Ideology on the Selected Novels

Lukács said, "Without ideology, there is no composition" (Writer142). The Assamese novel is an Assamese middle-class product. The author may sometimes transcend their class ideology, but in the selected novels it does not happen. Fathered by British imperialism and bereft of economic freedom, this class based its idea of nationalism on language and culture. *Bhasa* (language) was *janani* (mother) for it. This class never tried to uproot foreign imperialism and native feudalism. Hiren Gohain points out that "The history of the Assamese middle-class is, so to speak, the recognised history of modern Assam. In this recognised and standard history, the peasants' revolts of the nineteenth century are a storm outside the periphery" ("Madhyabittar Jeevanbed" 1). "They stood against the raj mels and helped to crush them"

(Gohain, "Asamar Madhyabitta" 559). They have "been leading the people's movements giving priority to their respective class interests and neglecting the hopes and expectations of the common people" (Gohain, *Progotir* 107). They drew political power from the rural agrarian people but "came away from the people from whom it drew its power" (Gohain, *Parampara* 112). Their sources of income "were mainly service and land given out for sharecropping" (Gohain, *Parampara* 108). So, they competed against the Bengali middle-class on the question of jobs and did not oppose the dominance of the landlord class in the rural agrarian sector, and could not give the farmers the right to land. This class position and ideology of the Assamese middle class of the first half of the twentieth century continued in the subsequent decades and the selected novels bear its imprints.

Seuji Patar Kahini has not turned into a *kahini* (tale) of *seuji pat* (green leaves); it is not about the coolie life but represents how the Assamese middle-class looks at that life. The mainstream middle-class hero of this seemingly labouring class novel is an escapist. His departure and that of the heroine allegorise the middle class's aloofness from the people's issues; the centrality of their story symbolises the centrality of the history of the Assamese middle class in the modern history of Assam. The hero would not earn as a coolie earns, so losing his service as a "boy" he bids farewell to the garden. Assamese middle-class fathered by British imperialism and associated with feudalism, cannot think of social disruption. So, characters working for radical social change are not imagined as the hero or the heroine. Sonia's protest is verbal, misplaced, individual, and ineffectual. Her "mysteriousness" is an ideological evasion; it helps the novel to avoid the marriage between a coolie girl and a mainstream boy. A common girl would have married her lover Nareswar. But she is presented as different from the tea garden labouring masses. She keeps her distance from them, flirts with and loves only the mainstream

characters and finally forsakes her people in pursuit of her separate peace. In a way her departure allegorises the Assamese middle class's turning back "from the people from whom it drew its power" (Gohain, *Parampara* 112). The novel does not mention any date yet its action must have taken place in the late nineteenth century. History proves that there were cases of revolt in the garden and the text also includes revolting characters like Feku and Durjon. Yet the novel prefers to depict a hero who does not confront the issues of oppression. The hero and the heroine are not seen in any reforming activities either. The only reformer, Naren, dies very early and he is allowed a space of seven pages only. Reformers and crusaders die or are given limited scope so that the conflict with the establishment may be avoided. Naren dies in *Seuji Patar Kahini*, Tulsi becomes lame in *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*.

Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya exposes the condition of alienated labour more explicitly. In it, the fight goes on and the main protagonists are taken from the oppressed. Yet it betrays the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology. The potentiality of class struggle is not fully utilised. The degree of oppression depicted in the beginning is not felt in the rest. The workers' progress is not seen as resulting from their struggle but from the sahibs' goodwill. The progress of their awareness is seen as a result of the mainstream's help. The union is formed but not a single activity of it is described. The workers' collective fight is always against the violation of the modesty of some women but never against economic exploitation. The class struggle gives way to the nationalist freedom struggle. The workers' union seems to be orphaned right at its birth. Other matters like enlightenment, assimilation, etc. – dear themes of the Assamese middle class – suppress the class struggle. The three books of the novel represent three phases of the development of the life and consciousness of the so-called coolies. Banha represents his community's silence. Tulsi

represents its class consciousness and fighting spirit. He stands for the growth of the individual also. Arjun represents its highest aspiration. He is more developed as an individual. He does not bother about the economic and political troubles of his community. His wish to become a doctor is purely a personal pursuit. The novel ends with him looking at the sunrise in the east. This symbolises the beginning of a new phase of more education, more assimilation with the mainstream, and more involvement in the national struggle; it does not require unionism. The working-class leader, Tulsi, fathers a middle-class son, Arjun. Chitta, the working-class leader transforms into a freedom fighter. His ideological shift is suggestive of the novel's ideological shift. The journey of the protagonist from Banha through Tulsi to Arjun is the journey from the community man to the individual man. The novel enacts this agenda of middle-class individualism. Further, the land-hungry mainstream Assamese middle-class can allow the coolies to have the right to education, but not the right to land. This class feels the need for the building of a greater Assamese nation based on the Assamese language. So the threads of assimilation and Arjun's education eclipse the thread of unionism. So the class struggle is not taken as the point of entry. The all-inclusive point of entry – the life and struggle of the plantation workers – loses focus on the condition of alienated labour.

The first objective of this study was to examine how the selected novels represent labour in general and alienated and creative labour in particular and what role the Assamese middle-class plays in delineating creative and alienated labour. The Assamese novel is the product of the Assamese middle class. Eagleton's general remark on the birth of the form of the novel may be quoted here in support of that claim, "If it is a form particularly associated with the middle class, it is partly because the ideology of that class centers on a dream of total freedom from restraint" (*The English* 2). The Assamese middle-class ideology

betrays itself in varying degrees and various ways in the formulation of the main protagonists of fiction, particularly the labour-oriented novels we are analysing. The hero is a male, mainstream, Assamese middle-class individual. The Assamese middle-class striving to achieve leadership in socio-cultural and politico-economic spheres of the state strives also to fulfill the slot for the hero in fiction. If he is not from the mainstream, he should, at least, earnestly try to assimilate into the Assamese language and culture. In other words, such a hero must serve the class interest of the Assamese middle class, that is, to strengthen Assamese nationalism through cultural means. In support of these claims, it may be stated that though *Seuji Pator Kahini* appears to be a novel based on the life of the tea garden labourers, the hero, Nareswar, is recruited not from this community but from the mainstream. The heroine, Sonia, is also not a coolie girl in the exact sense of the term. There is no scene in the novel where one or both of these two are absent. The characters of the pure tea-garden labourers are given relatively much less space. The novel begins and ends with the mainstream character Nareswar. In *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* the main protagonists are taken from the tea garden labourers' community, but here also the ultimate hero Arjun is going to fulfill the Assamese middle-class dream of strengthening the Assamese nation through education and assimilation; Arjun, unlike his father Tulsi, maintains distance from the workers' union.

The second objective was to explore how the novels represent over-determined reality and what points of entry are chosen to do that. It is found that the labour-oriented novels created by the Assamese middle-class authors are quite unwilling to take labour as the point of entry. *Seuji Pator Kahini* has several story threads like 1) the life of the tea garden people of Assam before the Independence, 2) the class struggle of the tea garden people against the condition of alienated labour, 3) the love affair between Nareswar and Sonia, 4) Prema-Aloti-

Boiragi love-triangle, 5) the myth and history of the Oja family, 6) social reform activities of people like Naren and challenges ahead and 7) failure of the search for happiness, peace, and humanity away from all conditions of oppression, injustice, cruelty, and inhumanity. The novel makes the last one its point of entry which is the expression of a middle class that is quite dependent on British colonial imperialism and which cannot delink itself from the neo-Vaishnavite idea of taking this world as a *maya* (illusion). This researcher wrote elsewhere, "Within this class, from the past to date, some medieval, feudal, patriarchal values have been being mixed in varying degrees with the liberal humanist this-worldly consciousness ... In the case of Assam, the heritage of neo-Vaishnavite tradition of regarding this world as 'a transitory respite', *maya* etc. may additionally be seen among this class" (Dutta 133).

Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya does not have too many story threads. Some threads are simply extensions or elaborations of the main thread or the point of entry and some others are not threads but episodes only. These threads or episodes are 1) The tea garden labourers' life under the condition of alienated labour and the gradual development of their fight against that condition, 2) contacts between the tea garden labourers and the mainstream Assamese people, 3) the formation of workers' union and the coolies' fight for the improvement of life-condition under it, 4) enlightenment of tea garden labourers through education symbolised by Arjun's and Rumni's schooling, 5) impact of the freedom movement, 6) accident in the river Chandini, death of Manager Fredrick and its aftermath and 7) the earthquake of 1897 and its impact on Rupohijan Tea Estate. The first one is the point of entry and doubtless, it directly addresses the issue of alienated labour. Despite this, it has been seen that this novel also dilutes the issue of representing the condition of alienated labour and the struggle against it through several means. One important means is to make the struggle more cultural than politico-

economic and another is to divert the struggle from class to nationalist. In order to do the former, Arjun is made the hero and building up of his educational career prioritized over the activities of the Workers' Union. The latter is realized through the metamorphosis of the revolutionary leader, Chitta, who began as a leader of the working class movement but ended as one of the freedom Movement. Lurking behind all this is the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology.

The third question this study is meant to deal with is if the Marxian imagination plays any role in the making of the selected novels. Julian Markels defines the Marxian imagination in this way, "This is the imagination of the enlargement of life and freedom specifically promised by the abolition of class when class is understood as an over-determined process of appropriating and distributing surplus labour without consulting those who perform the labour" (12). This is opposed to the liberal imagination advocated by Lionel Trilling which he defines as a "great primal act of imagination by which it establishes its essence and existence – in the interest, that is, of its vision of a general enlargement and freedom and rational direction of human life" (xiii). Thus both types of imagination – liberal and Marxian – crave the general enlargement of life and freedom, but the latter is distinguished from the former by the fact that it believes that the general enlargement of life and freedom is possible only through the abolition of classes. An imagination of the abolition of classes cannot but see the classes, their contention, their positions in the system of production, and the fight of the exploited classes against the appropriators of the alienated labour. Given the limitations of the historical situations, a novel may not be able to visualise a free and enlarged life achieved through the abolition of the classes, but it can certainly represent that desire and depict the class struggle which is the path to achieve that life. In this regard, the selected novels represent varying degrees of curious mingling of the

liberal and Marxian brands of imagination and in the last instance allow the liberal imagination to get the better of the Marxian. This results from the impact of the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology.

Shashi Sharma remarks, "The contribution of *Seuji Patar Kahini* in invigorating the trend of the Assamese progressive novel must be recognised because it has been able to show hatred toward the oppressors and sympathy towards the oppressed" ("Asomiya" 44). One implication of Sharma's remark is that the novel incarnates the Marxian imagination. But, it is far from the truth. *Seuji Patar Kahini* examines the society of the late Ahom rule, the pre-Independence society of the Ojar Gaon, the tea garden society, and the society of the British officials in Assam to explore the possibility of a free and enlarged life. "How can man escape from the prison of humanity?" (Gohain, "Birinchī" 375). The novel, like Rabindranath, means to say every time, "Hetha noy, hetha noy, anya kotha, anya konkhane" (qtd. in Gohain, "Birinchī" 375). Thus the search is shown as a failed search and this failure makes the novel a tragedy. Clearly, this cannot be a position that a Marxist imagination will take. Lukács says, "Those who wish to despair may find cause enough and more in our everyday life....Where the philosophy of despair weeps for the collapse of a world and the destruction of culture, there Marxists watch the birth-pangs of a new world and assist in mitigating the pains of labour" (*Studies* 2). None in the novel systematically works for "mitigating the pains of labour". The pain of labour may be mitigated only through working for the abolition of the classes which, in turn, requires an organised struggle against the condition of alienated labour. Despite the potential for such a struggle, inherent in the condition depicted in the novel, it prefers not to utilise that potential. The departure of the hero and the heroine from the garden is an allegory, not only of the departure of the Assamese middle class from the people's struggle against

the harsh realities of life but also of the novel's evasion from the theme of class struggle. That sadness and failure of the search are seen in all the societies depicted indicates that this sadness and failure is the universal human lot. Repetition leads to universalisation. The Assamese middle-class that emerged and developed only under the patronisation of British imperialism could not be this-worldly like its European counterpart and so the other-worldly philosophy of the Bhakti movement kept influencing it. "The new Assamese middle-class became extremely conscious of the Mahapurusiya tradition of the past Assam" (Gohain, "Mafizuddin" 408).

In *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* also, the cruel oppression of the coolies is very vividly portrayed in the first chapters. Doubtless, the brutal oppression is depicted with a rare sympathy for the oppressed. Yet it does not necessarily contribute to the Marxian imagination. The oppressed people are not a surplus-producing class in the first four chapters, they start producing surplus only after they become coolies in Assam. Class is not a matter of rank or status but it signifies how people are related to the process of production. In the first four chapters, they are not a class in this sense; they are only a potential class. So, the yardstick of class abolition to measure the Marxian imagination cannot be fully applied to these chapters. The theme of class exploitation continues in the subsequent chapters. But the portrayal of extreme oppression, in the beginning, helps to project their life at Rupohijan as better. So, the class exploitation at Rupohijan could not be depicted with the same intensity; the intensity of oppression and artistic intensity of representation of that intense oppression reaches its zenith in the beginning, compelling the rest to have lesser intensity of oppression and lesser intensity of artistic representation of that oppression. So, the rest looks like a relief and this relief is achieved without any class struggle and its representation. The beginning thus is powerful

in its own right but it steals the potential power of the rest and thus contributes to weaken the Marxian imagination. So, class exploitation is not intensely felt, a fight against it is not intensely desired and the depiction of the organised activities of the union is not at the centre. The theme of class struggle is diluted by the theme of class promotion; abolition of the classes is not a dream but enlightenment through education and assimilation with the mainstream are the dreams. The novel comes to an end with Arjun and Rumni, the educated duo, looking at the rising sun – a symbol of a new beginning, although there is no change of relation of production in the garden. So, the novel cannot be said to have a Marxian imagination.

The findings may be summarised in this way: first, the representation of labour in general and alienated and creative labour in particular in the selected novels are largely conditioned by the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology. Secondly, the representation of the over-determined reality and the choice of the point of entry in each of the selected novels are largely influenced by the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology. Thirdly, the selected novels blend the Marxian and liberal imagination in various ways but finally, the liberal imagination wins over the Marxian imagination in each of the selected novels as a result of the impact of the Assamese middle-class ideology.

Impact of Ideology on Formal Aspects

Ideology controls several formal aspects of the novels. The title may be considered first. *Seuji Patar Kahini* is an ironic title. The connotation of the green leaves (*seuji pat*) hides the fact of oppression and pain of people. Irony more hides than reveals. This is in keeping with the novel as it also more hides than reveals. The title of *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* is more evocative of the sufferings of the toiling mass. This novel is also more revealing of alienated labour. *Seuji Patar Kahini* starts and ends with

the mainstream but *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* with the coolies. Both start in the evening but whereas the former ends at midnight, the latter ends in the morning. The former delineates only one generation of the coolies but the latter three distinct stages that continually develop. Workers' union is not there in the former, but it is there in the latter.

Findings

To conclude, Man is the main focus of the novelistic representation and man's essence is free, creative labour. Therefore a novel ideally, has to represent creative labour or its opposite alienated labour. Although labour is fundamental to human existence, human life, and society are a much more intricate "web of human lots", that is, they are complexes of many over-determined processes. A novel cannot avoid giving adequate representation to all such processes. But to remain faithful to its primary task of representing the human essence, a novel can, nay should, take labour as its point of entry while not denying representational justice to other processes of the over-determined social reality. This applies to all novels and more particularly to labour-oriented novels. The two key Assamese novels selected for this research are generally taken for labour-oriented novels and they were published in a period that consolidated the power of the Assamese middle class as the strongest leading force in the state of Assam. Close analysis reveals that creative and alienated labour are not adequately represented and the point of entry of each of these five is also not adequately based on creative or alienated labour. This research finds that it is the mainstream Assamese middle-class ideology that causes the inadequacy of representation of labour in each of them. The artist's faithful dedication to his art sometimes enables her to transcend her class ideology and thus to represent the truth of society more adequately. Such transcendence of ideology by art could not be noticed in the selected novels. Each of them somewhat addresses the interlinked issues of labour, alienated labour, exploitation, and

struggle, but ultimately dilutes these issues, deviates from them, diverts them, and suppresses them only to serve the ideology of the mainstream Assamese middle class. This impact of ideology is seen not only in the content but in the aspects of form as well.

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