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Reflection of Urban Life in the Short Stories of Saurav Kumar Chaliha

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Abstract:

Saurav Kumar Chaliha occupies an enviable position among the Assamese short-story writers of the post-Independence period. He is not only the greatest Assamese story-teller of modern times but also one of the pioneer writers of short fiction in Indian literature as a whole. His stories are an agonizing testament of the loneliness and anxiety, cruelty and anguish, restlessness and uncertainty, doubt and defeat of modern urban life. He discarded the traditional method of story-telling informed by a well-knit plot and realistic portraiture. On the contrary, he accepted the subjective, psychological approach with a preference for metaphorical characters. He has invented a new urban language and a distinct narrative style to express the multi-layered consciousness of his characters. With a dexterous hand, Chaliha has captured the self-centrism, hypocrisy, indifference and moral degradation of urban life in Assam as well as India.

Keywords: Urban, short stories, Saurav Chaliha, values, hypocrisy, artificial.

Introduction:

Saurav Kumar Chaliha is a prominent name in the realm of Assamese short story of the post-war period. He earned name and fame as a story teller with the publication of his 'Ashanta Electron' (Restless Electron), a unique and unconventional story set against the urban background, in the journal *Ramdhenu* in 1952. The subject matter of Chaliha's stories is commonly built around the artificial and mechanical life of urban middle class society. He has "captured the intellectual idiom of the urbanized landscape as nobody has."¹ With the onset of urbanization, earning livelihood became strenuous, erosion of human values, corruption, exploitation, hypocrisy, moral bankruptcy, deceit and depression took place at a fast pace. Saurav Chaliha has delineated these changes of Assamese life brought in by urbanization in quite an innovative and inimitable style. "The thematic content of Saurav Chaliha's stories is generally

city-centric and their presentation is sharply intellectual.”² Chaliha shows his deep concern at the gradual loss of humanitarian sentiment in the humdrum of urban life: “Now in stories and novels alike, a strain of disillusionment and hopelessness fills the air....In stories like ‘Heral’, ‘Bina Kutir’ and ‘Ratir Rail’, under changed life and situations, as if the writer is groping amidst utter darkness in search of fresh interesting promises—promises which went missing long ago.”³ The present paper aims at analyzing select stories of Saurav Kumar Chaliha to find out various aspects of urban life reflected in them.

Reflection of Post-War Urban Society:

Going through the stories of Saurav Kumar Chaliha, one feels profound familiarity with the varied moods of urban life. The aim of the writer is to bring before his readers the follies and vices, timidity and hypocrisy of modern citizen life under different circumstances. The story ‘Ashanta Electron’ portrays an authentic picture of the leprous Indian society during post World War period. The newly formed urban society after the war gradually became the abode of mean money-mongers, corrupt bribe-takers, black-marketeers and ideologically bankrupt politicians. Chaliha has caught the eroding values of nouveau rich urban society and the pitiable plight of the downtrodden with blatant realism in montage-like frames:

The neighbourhood meanwhile had picked up pace. He could see their greed, their lust, cowardice and opportunistic tendencies. A man has been sick for ten continuous days and Mr. Advocate did not consider it necessary to pay a visit. Mr. and Mrs. Dutta have gained weight feeding on the bribes. With the ill-gotten money from black marketing kerosene and CI sheet, Mahendra Borsaikia is busy building a newly designed house. Lolit’s mother, that old woman, she goes from house to house bitching about one another. And there is Mr. Khagen Das, the war time contractor drowned in alcohol and has been acting mysterious lately. The new radios in the neighbourhood have turned living into a nightmare. The new Ford and De Soto cars slowly rolled out of the garages. The bank clerk Rambabu and the lawyer’s accountant Chandi Kalita and the likes in that class saw their condition tilting in the opposite direction. Chandi Kalita could not afford to buy a

new frock for his little daughter. For the past three months she has been wearing a tattered frock exposing her chest.⁴

The character of Nikhil in the story is that of a passive, neutral being. He is like a neutron, a particle without charge. But there is motion in the lives of his sister-in-law, Ranjan, Sunti baideu and Jatibabu. They are moving in a circular motion like electrons and protons. “The condition in which Nikhil and others live is devoid of spirituality, there is only selfish motive. Depicting Nikhil as an enigma the writer tries to delineate the picture of conflicting life reflected in the breast of society....The writer seeks to suggest the stream of flowing life with static theory of science.”⁵

Reflection of Mental World:

The narrative style of Saurav Chaliha’s stories has its own distinctive features. He knows how to present an ordinary incident, situation, or mental condition in the form of a beautiful story. Through the mastery he has earned in this subject, the glimpse of a rare combination of his reflective mind, aesthetic sense and minute observation becomes evident.⁶ Apart from various scenes of urban life, he has written stories with a centering interest in the mental states of the characters.⁷ A number of stories of Chaliha are therefore seen to move at two levels: one through incidents of urban life and the other through the mental world of the characters.⁸

The story ‘Basantika’ (Of Springtime) develops through internal dialogues in the mind of the protagonist, between his self and his alter ego. The protagonist feels the joy of spring on successful completion of a scientific experiment. But there is merciless irony in the vernal feeling of the principal character. There is another character in the story, a young girl who is the representative of multitude of nameless, identitiless urban middle class people with slender means. This second character suffering from consumption is presented in the story quite casually, proportionate with the protagonist’s cool response to her existence. When the protagonist feels the spring sonata through his joy at the success of his research experiment, the girl is taken to the hospital by a van. The remark of the protagonist in the matter reflects the insouciant self-centredness of the city-dwellers: “I put up an effort at laughter, and said, ‘Whatever be it, a little peace has arrived.’”⁹ This event betrays the lack of mutual relationship, human sympathy and concern in city life. Despite sharing a separate part of the same rent-house, the protagonist does not know the name of the girl lacerated by struggle of life. For him she is

sometimes Anamika, sometimes Bihbala, and he does not care a fig for her: “Such a huge city, so many people, who could keep tabs on the others, was there any time to do that, how was one affected by the affairs of the others!”¹⁰

Erosion of Values:

It becomes apparent in the story ‘Bina Kutir’ (Bina Cottage) how in the modern era the old but eternal values have been degraded coming into contact with newly formed city-centric cash-all mentality.¹¹ The setting of the story is Guwahati city. The protagonist of the story sets out in search of a rent-house, but he discovers himself in an extraordinary situation in which he becomes aware of the existence of several curious characters with diverse mentality. The owner of the house named Bina Kutir was a teacher. Being a studious person and a writer, he was of a steady and firm nature. The conflict between the values he upheld and those of his professor and doctor sons becomes obvious throughout the story. Although the characters of the story—the teacher, his two sons, his younger daughter-in-law, his daughter and son-in-law—have not been directly presented in the story, the writer gives ample proof of his skill by depicting the conflicts, actions and reactions in the mental world of these characters through light and shade technique. Out in his mission for a rented house, the protagonist takes coca-cola at a shop and comes to know from the shop boy the history of the house Bina Kutir and the family of its owner.

‘Bina Kutir’ offers a glaring example as to how urban civilization has eroded the time-honoured values like feelings and sentiments, love and respect, filial duty and bond of family, and how the passion for property of the urban middle class has spread from one to all. The protagonist, who fantasized about the inheritors of Bina Kutir as the protectors of these olden values, is disillusioned at the end of the story by the opposite revelation of the shop-keeper. The mystery behind the old Assam type house remaining alone in its original state amidst scores of multi-storeyed buildings is unveiled. The *status quo* of Bina Kutir is maintained due to property dispute between the two brothers, not because of any sublime feeling to keep traditions alive.

Selfishness of Urban Middle Class:

The story ‘Ehat Daba’ (A Game of Chess) presents two characters of opposite nature sitting before the chess-board. One is a city-based successful businessman who is quite practical in his view of life, and the other is unworldly Benu Mishra, an artist defeated in the struggle of life. While thinking about the next moves of chess and planning the strategy to win the game, dispersed thoughts occur in the minds of Benu Mishra and his businessman friend who narrates

the story in first person. In fact, the writer's aim is to unravel the layers of consciousness in the minds of the two characters. The game of chess stands as a metaphor for the game of life. The two players represent two different outlooks towards life. The writer has skillfully coordinated the slow moves of chess and the fast speed of thoughts with the movement of the story. The writer is not an omniscient narrator here. But the haughty attitude of urban cash-rich society is clearly reflected through the interior monologues of the pragmatic businessman.

The businessman friend, never a loser in life, is all determined not to show any sympathy to his artist friend who is a failure throughout his life: "It is said that we can never forgive those we hurt and those to whom we do injustice. God knows who thinks up such ideas. May be the reason is that such action fully exposes our own penury and ruins the equanimity of our self-satisfaction. It could be true; it may not be true. But I am not going to give him whisky and send him home on a delighted high. And Benu Mishra is not my Ami; I don't see any need to let him win. He should get his desserts."¹² At the end of the story, the rich businessman puts his artist friend in checkmate quite rapturously. We see in this rapture the glee of a rich urban socialite who is ready to topple aesthetic value from its high station in human life. The credit of Saurav Chaliha lies in his ability to portray the selfishness of urban middle class in such a realistic manner.

Urban Language—A Mixed Bag:

In order to express the uncertainty, doubt, restlessness, busyness, fear, etc. of urban life, the writer has to pick up hybrid words, colloquial language and specifically, words from widely circulated language in city life.¹³ The abrupt beginning of 'Bhraman Birati' (Break Journey) best expresses Chaliha's peculiar use of language appropriate to the urban setting:

All this meaningless destruction, this senseless rioting and arson, setting trams and buses on fire at random, on some pretext or other, this sudden conflagration, people running helter-skelter in desperation, the wailing of a siren followed by police vehicles, 'lathi' charge, tear gas, and the sound of bullets, — that old man stumbling and falling on his face at the street corner, the little boy screaming with pain and fear when a bullet struck his foot, — I do not understand why I come here again and again, to see all this . I find all this intolerable- yet I come again and again. Why! I am a busy man, I have work to do. But without any warning my taxi is stopped by a group of red flag wielding young men, and my work goes down the drain. The tram suddenly stops, — thousands of slogan

shouting and overwrought young men arrive from somewhere and surround the tram. Tins of petrol, bricks and steel pipes make their appearance. As one watches, almost before one can blink an eyelid, the tram bursts into flames, people flee in all directions, screaming and shouting amidst the smoke and fire. The shops quickly down their shutters. The batons and sticks are wielded at random, window panes are shattered and pieces of broken glass rain down, there is chaos everywhere. ‘Run, run, man, what are you staring at!’¹⁴

‘Bhraman Birati’ is set against the background of strife-torn Kolkata city. The writer gives a graphic description of an embroiling situation in the city of Kolkata. An old couple wanted to take a short repose in the city in between their long tour. But the irony of life is that real repose remains an illusion. That is more so in an urban situation. Far from attaining rejuvenation of rest, the old couple has been compelled to flee for their life. The writer is quite aware that refined unalloyed variety of language cannot express the face of urban life and the nature of urban characters realistically. Hence the syntax of language used in ‘Bhraman Birati’ does not follow the structure of standard Assamese language, there is abundance of words from other languages including Bengali and English. “The most notable characteristic of the story ‘Bhraman Birati’ is the effort to explore the truth of life with the view of Freudian philosophy.... Based on such psychoanalysis of Freud about life, theoretical explanation about man’s life instinct and death instinct have been presented in the story”.¹⁵

Slavish Mentality of Urban Middle Class:

In ‘Golam’ (Slaves), Chaliha has satirized the mentality of urban educated class that does not hesitate to forsake honesty, truthfulness and dedication in order to fulfil petty selfish interests. A parasitic, slavish character from Guwahati brought up in colonial atmosphere has been placed opposite a simple-minded, genial character of a German city. To obtain anyhow a German diploma essential for his promotion, the protagonist of the story writes an essay in German language by translating a description from an old German-English book, in which he changes only the names, puts ‘Guwahati’ in place of ‘our town’. “In fact, the central idea of the story ‘Golam’ is a lashing mockery at the administration of post-Independence period. Further, the empty and self-aggrandizing shallow mentality of Assamese as well as Indian educated middle class is derided.”¹⁶

Although the story is set in a German city, the writer cleverly brings into the narrative a deplorable picture of the Guwahati city. The protagonist from Guwahati goes to Germany in order to obtain training in business administration. He is required to take a test in German language for which he entirely copies an essay from an old German-English book without any moral scruple. He simply replaces the phrase ‘our town’ with the word ‘Guwahati’ and tries to evade the plain enquiries of the kind-hearted lady examiner:

What answer could I give to such a question? I just wanted to get the diploma so that I could take it back and flaunt it before my countrymen. A diploma from Germany! Promotion would be inevitable! I may not be able to buy land or a car for the first few years; but what does it matter? At least I would have ‘returned from abroad’! Isn’t that enough? Hasn’t every Ram, Shyam and Jodu, managed by hook or by crook, citing different pretexts, to ‘return from abroad’ in this manner? They have all invented strange pretexts to achieve this feat or else life would be meaningless, a total failure, so why should I leave it regretting what?¹⁷

Apart from exposing the slavish mindset of urban middle class inherited from colonial upbringing, the story aptly catches the irresponsibility and inefficiency of the ruling class during the post Independence era and puts the blame on them for the dirty and dinghy condition of Guwahati city.

Conclusion:

From the foregoing discussion, it has come out that Saurav Kumar Chaliha has captured in his stories the anguish of modern urban life in quite a convincing manner. The urban life he portrays is artificial and mechanical, unfeeling and unromantic. Parallel with urbanization, the picture of declining humanism and weakening sympathy and trust, respect and responsibility of one man to another has been clearly and vividly reflected in Chaliha’s stories. Sense of alienation born out of urban individual’s extreme self-centredness is a hallmark of the stories. The writer equally pokes fun at the hypocritical urban educated class, the wealthy exploiters and the so-called champions of the proletariat. Most importantly, though the stories of Chaliha are highly subjective, they are imbued with intense social consciousness. The writer shows his strong concern at the erosion of human values in the urban society. While depicting the scenes from urban life, Chaliha does not state what it ought to be, but he shows what it actually is. Without the zeal of a reformer, the story teller mercilessly exposes the hypocrisy, selfishness, greed and opportunism of urban elite

society. Over and above, the sweeping influence of urbanization on the Assamese language is best reflected in the stories of Chaliha. The urban language is a mixed bag and Saurav Chaliha has been immensely successful to capture the variety of tone of the urban Assamese language.

Notes:

1. Hem Barua, *Assamese Literature* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1965), p. 241.
2. Mahendra Borah, *Sahitya Aru Sahitya* (Dibrugarh: Banalata, 1988), p. 174.
3. Hiren Gohain, *Sahitya Aru Chetana*, 2nd edition (Guwahati: Lawyers Book Stall, 1991), p. 80.
4. Saurav Kumar Chaliha, *Ashanta Electron*, 2nd Edition (Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1993), p. 15.
5. Trailokya Nath Goswami, *Adhunik Galpa Sahitya*, 4th edition (Guwahati: Bani Prakash, 1994), p. 170.
6. Syed Abdul Malik, "Asamiya Chutigalpar Angik", *Madhya Bingsha Satikar Asamiya Sahitya*, ed. Tafazzul Ali (Mangaldai: Reception Committee, 41st Annual Session of Assam Sahitya Sabha, 1974), pp. 258-59.
7. Rupshree Goswami, "Saurav Kumar Chaliha aru Bhabendranath Saikiar Galpa: Eti Tulanatmak Adhyayan", *Gariyoshi* Vol. 15, Issue 8 (May, 2008), p. 45.
8. Harekrishna Deka, "Saurav Kumar Chalihar Galpa", Introduction to *Saurav Chalihar Swanirbachita Galpa* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1998), p. viii.
9. Saurav Kumar Chaliha, *Saurav Chalihar Swanirbachita Galpa*, (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1998), p. 11.
10. ibid, p. 2.
11. Kumud Goswami, "Asamiya Chutigalpar Gatidhara", *Prakash* Vol. 10, Issue 1 (1984), p. 202.
12. Saurav Kumar Chaliha, op. cit., p. 53.
13. Jamuna Sarmah Choudhury, "Ramdhenu Jugar Asomiya Chutigalpa: Angikar Uttaran: 'Eti Alochana'", *Bhasa-Sahitya-Sanskriti Parikrama*, ed. Suresh Kr. Arya (Tezpur: Tezpur Sahitya Chora, 2009), p. 124.
14. Saurav Kumar Chaliha, op. cit., p. 73.



15. Prahlad Kumar Baruah, *Asomiya Cuti Galpar Adhyayana*, 2nd edition (Dibrugarh: Banalata, 2005), pp. 258-59.
16. ibid, p. 261.
17. Saurav Kumar Chaliha, op. cit., p. 85.

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