

FEMALE IDENTITY: RE-READING ‘SUDHARMAR UPAKHYAN’

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Abstract

It is less significant whether Padmawati Devi Phookanani, the author of *Sudharmar Upakhyan* is the first novelist in Assamese, but being a female the epoch that she had made in 1884 through this novel is unquestionably praiseworthy. This legendary lady was born in the respectable family of Anandaram Dhekiyal Phookan in 1853. When she was born there was no school for girls' education. Anandaram Dhekiyal Phookan was the tutor as well as her father to teach her to read and to write and to make her the pioneer of women's movement in Assam. The novel *Sudharmar Upakhyan* is unquestionably a noble work made by the author in the mid nineteenth century. However, it is painful to notice that in twenty first century she has been often neglected. Her works has given less value. Here in this paper an attempt has been made to reevaluate *Sudharmar Upakhyan* through the eyes of 'others' to find out various vital issues in understanding the two leading female characters namely Sudharma and Leela in this novel.

It is less significant whether Padmavati Devi Phukononi, the author of *Sudharmar Upakhyan* is the first Assamese novelist, but being a female the epoch that she had made in 1884 through this novel is unquestionably praiseworthy. Published in 1884, *Sudharmar Upakhyan* is the first Assamese fictional narrative in prose that bears the stamp of *Jantrikar Jatra* a translation of John Bannyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, serialized in *Orunodoi* from it's January 1851 issue.

In appearance *Sudharmar Upakhyan* is in very simple narrative. Two newly married couples Satyaban- Sudharma and Madhab Chandra- Leelabati had started a river voyage for merchantry deeds. After taking a few days journey a dreadful storm had broken down their boat and all the four members had to face the worst. Sudharma and Leelabati were rescued by an old boat man and had given shelter at his own house. They failed to get any information about their husbands. Meanwhile a rich man of that village came forward to seduce Sudharma, promising her to marry. Sudharma and Leelabati finding no way to save their chastity escaped one night and entered into a deep forest. However, inside the forest they were not safe until they had taken shelter in a Siva temple. There they met one lady named Manorama, who had been physically tortured and betrayed by her husband named Manmohan. At the end the author had shown a very positive beginning where all the three females get back their husbands and spend the rest of their lives with peace and prosperity.

Now the readers or critics of *Sudharmar Upakhyan* often neglect the real spirit of the author and consider it as a simple story without having any depth. ‘Duyo jen mathon bhagyar hatar putula. Aeoloke naribadar hake kenekoi thiya diba.’ (These females are mere puppets under the hands of destiny. How they can stand for feminism).¹ But this kind statement is not acceptable. Sudharma, Leelabati and Manorama are the representative icons of modern women who believe on their own existence and stand into their own position, accepting their male partner at the end of the story.

It is interesting to notice that before the publication of *Sudharmar Upakhyan* all Assamese writings were in the form of chronicles known as ‘Buranji’. However, the entry of the missionaries had made a tremendous change in Assamese society and developed Assamese language and literature. The publication of *Sudharmar Upakhyan* in 1884 became possible for a number of reasons and the missionaries were one of them. The novel contains several interesting features that left their marks on the first Assamese fiction. The author Padmavati Devii Phukanoni was born in the family of Anadaram Dhekiyal Phukan (1829-1859) one of the brightest thinkers as well as writers of Assam. She received no formal education. What she has learned, learned from her parents. After her marriage she had little time for widening her writings as she was confined to the domestic space. It is surprising to notice that she had given birth as many as 18 children of whom only three survived beyond childhood. Still, she never made any objection to life. Her biographers have referred her as an ideal wife and mother who never aspired to be anything else other than what Virginia Woolf calls ‘the angel of the house’.²

Padmati Devi Phukanoni was very sensitive about the rights of women. On female education she says:

*“We must consider carefully the meaning of the word ‘education’. To send a girl to school with a Bengali primer in hand to learn the alphabets.... then to start reading books like Rukmini Haran, Subhadra Haran, Bidyasundar and Kamini Kumar does not mean education. Dear reader forgives me for writing this. There is no doubt that if you can give your daughters, sisters and wives good religious and moral education, they would grow into pious and good women. But where would you have time to do this. A girl has to be married before she is eleven. What she can learn in the five or six years at home? After marriage too the husband does not have the means to keep two or three servants to do the house works so that the wife may study.”*³

The author was making this comment when women got hardly any time to spare for herself. Here we may quote what Virginia Woolf had stated that the female lacks three things money, leisure and a room of their own. Besides, the contemporary society was also against the female literacy. It is quite visible when nobody had made any criticism against the publication of an article titled- ‘Tirotar Ban Ki’ in *Mou*, an assamese periodical. Here the author Holiram Bora writes: “*One can tolerate restlessness in man, but in women it is a great vice and the best way to cure them at this is by getting them to weave. While spinning and*

¹ Sarma, G.P. *Naribad aru Asomiya Upanyas*, Asom Parakashan Parishad: Ghy. Dec.2007

² Woolf, 1966. "Professions for Women", *Collected Essays* (London: Hogarth Press)

³ Purnakanta Sarma: *Stree Shiksha* P-466

weaving she would be compelled to sit still for long hours.... A virtuous woman is like a boat capable of bearing burdens silently while men is the boatman controlling and guiding her.... If women aspire leave their own work and aspire to do masculine work like doing BA or MA, we should be afraid of such male woman...’’⁴

Padmavati Devi Phukanoni was living and writing during this period when the so-called male writers like Holiram Bora and others tried to dominate the females. But Padmavati Devi Phukanoni was conscious enough to understand the power of writing. She knew that writing is a form of self assertion which is not considered as a feminine virtue. Her anxiety to assert feminine virtue comes out in the brief preface that she has added in *Sudharmar Upakhayan*:

*“Though I am going ahead with the resolve to publish this little book, I am not hoping that readers will enjoy reading it. Even then I am being bold enough to publish it with the hope that the readers will over look its defects because it is written by a woman’.*⁵

Therefore, it will be an injustice to consider Padmavati Devi Phukanoni as an ordinary writer having no merit of her writings. She is conscious about the pathetic condition of here contemporary women. But in writing *Sudharamar Upakhayan* she was forced to rethink and to rewrite many aspects by the contemporary male dominated society. Still in portraying characters like Monorama she shows how female are devoted to their husband even after knowing that her husband is a drunker, a debauchee. Being a conscious female, she also shows how the Assamese female worshiped their respective husbands even after their disappearance. Portraying characters like Sudharama, Manorama or Leelabati the author of course stands against male chauvinism and proves that females can face all the hurdles even without their husbands and can control their instincts for better tomorrow. Otherwise, they could have surrendered themselves when they have not got back their husband. Monorama knew about the real nature of her husband. But despite of all, she worshipped him like a god and patiently bears mental and physical violence until her husband left her inside a forest. At the end of the story, she could accept her husband because she knew that it is the only way to save her husband and to live a happy life. This is of course an excellent example of modern feminism, where women also accept the presents of men in the society.

*Primary Source: Padmavati Devi Phukanoni: *Sudharmar Upakhyan* (1884) Reprint, Ghy. 1967

⁴ T. Mishra *Early Asomiya Novels, New Genre, Traditional Mindset and Changing Perspectives in Early Novels in India* (Ed. Minakshi Mukharjee) Sahitya Academi: New Delhi, 2005

⁵ Ibid.