

Lutfa Hanum Salima Begum's 'Botahat Torar Akhoi Phutise'

By Ananda Bormudoi



Lutfa Hanum Salima Begum, best known for the emotional intensity of her lyrics, has written an altogether different kind of poems in her latest collection titled *Botahat Torar Akhoi Phutise*. The title itself is an unusual comparison between the stars and the *akhoi*, i.e., rice kernels that burst open when heated. Just as T. E. Hulme compared the star studded sky to a moth eaten blanket, Lutfa compares the mundane to the celestial many a time. A reader familiar with the feature of frying rice suddenly becomes aware of the sight of the shining stars which resembles that of rice on a frying pan which pop open in a moment in large number.

The themes of some of the finest lyrics of the collection are familiar things of everyday life and words are picked up from the conversational language, philosophy and folk tales. Language associated with the cropland has played an important role in structuring emotions and feelings in some of the poems. Ready wit and play of words with more than one meaning have made some of the poems unforgettable. Most unexpected turns and twists given to the progress of ideas in some poems make them amusing and entertaining. The poet is making comparisons either way—the mundane to the celestial and the celestial to the commonplace to create a desired effect. The poet shows rare gift in writing exquisite lyrics on familiar things like a chair, a hole, a house, a local train, a hairband and the like. Tragic strains ring unmistakably amidst joy and laughter and in some other poems the note of sadness is in inchoate form. In some of the poems the central

theme is the transience of everything in this world and a realization that life is a vanity of all vanities. Words, thoughts and ideas in quite a few poems are intimately bound up with cultural and spiritual life of rural Assam.

The poem titled ‘Phutar Kavita’, i.e., a poem on a hole, reveals some distinctive features of the poet. Lyrics usually select themes of love and death and from this point of view a hole does not seem to be a suitable subject for a poem, but the poet has written a memorable poem on it exploring the resources of language to finally connect it with futility and death. The poem begins, “When little children spot a hole/ They put their fingers into it/ Turning and widening it/ As they grow up/ They learn to peep through the holes/ The holes appeal to them/ They become curious.” The poet then moves on to the holes visible and invisible and wonders if a hole can branch out like a tree. Contemplating on holes, she finds that the holes have not always been holes or cavities. They were once solid. Except the holes in a fishing net or a strainer, all other holes are then compared to fret, fury and fever which make life unhappy. Personifying the holes, the poet calls them patients suffering from long drawn illness and incompetent tailors unable to repair holes in their own garments.

After a delightful description of holes made on nostrils and earlobes for wearing ornaments, the poet goes on to describe holes on a flute, holes on a sieve, and puncture on a bicycle tube. The significance of the holes slowly changes as they are compared to the sun and the moon and drops of tears. The holes are now merged with the suffering of unfortunate men for whom nobody bothers. Nobody has written about those unsheltered people. The holes then become paradoxical. Some holes warn us against danger and some others drown us. In the final stanza of the poem, the hole resembles the figure zero, “The zero looks like a hole/ But all holes are not/ Like the zero/ The void is an enormous hole.”

The poet can move at ease between the world of reality and the world of her imagination. These two worlds are not opposed worlds. In her vision life is ironical and paradoxical. The poem titled ‘Ghar’, i.e., house, illustrates this point. A man builds a house to protect himself from sun and shower and the anxieties of houselessness but the house, instead of protecting him from insecurities and worries, increases them. The house itself becomes an additional anxiety. He is ridden inside the house by bullets of doubts and fears.

In the second half of the poem the house becomes a metaphor of the human body and the house is shown as real against the unreality of the human body. Conflicts and oppositions between the body and the house are finally resolved with the possibility that one day the owner of the house may hang from the wall as an oil painting.

God and nature were expelled from modernist Assamese poetry. Nature that came back in the sixties of the last century has stayed in poetry but it is not nature of the romantic poets to reveal the glory of God. The poem ‘Ghar’ and ‘Panir Sangsar’ (futile household) are a class by themselves in so far as they keep religious philosophy of Vaishnavism central to the themes.

One important feature of Lutfia’s poems is that she can communicate one thing in terms of another. An example is ‘Tola aru Chabi’, i.e., the lock and the key. The poem begins, “The lock and the key/ Are for each other/ One may be for the other/ And yet they are different.” The poet

confers on them human attributes to show how they differ from each other. Men lock doors and sleep peacefully or they lock doors and go away without anxiety. They leave the lock behind but carry the key with them. But they lose their keys and fail to open the doors. When they lost faith in the lock they went for sensors.

Lutfa Hanum Salima Begum's poems are written in simple and delightful language and they communicate with readers for several reasons. Most of the poems have a ballad like quality which makes her poems readable. There are undertones and overtones which the readers are unlikely to miss. The music of words in her poems appeals to us and we do not remain conscious of the intellect that we engage to understand the poems.

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