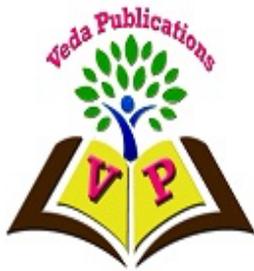




RESEARCH ARTICLE

**IDEOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION OF ALIENATED LABOR IN
SEUJI PATOR KAHINI**

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Marx considers free, creative labor to be the essence of humanity, and forced, alienated labor cripples that essential humanity. In the condition of alienated labor, the product is greater than the worker, though it is labor objectified yet it becomes independent of and hostile to the worker. Though labor is the actual key to humanity and a novel wants to show what man is, yet labor is not central but a highly marginal concern in the world of novels and also in the criticism of novels, including the labor-based ones.

A study of one key Assamese novel, *Seuji Pator Kahini*, may reflect the condition of alienated labor, which largely determines its form, plot, character, narrative technique, symbolism, etc., and that reflection is also largely determined by ideology. This study aims to demonstrate how the ideological representation of alienated labor significantly influences its novelistic aspects.

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INTRODUCTION

Seuji Pator Kahini is very popular among Assamese readers and critics. As a novel, like all others, it cannot but depict “man”. For Marx, it is free, creative labor that makes man human. On the contrary, the condition of alienated labor cripples that human essence and thus dehumanizes man. A novel like *Seuji Pator Kahini* must engage itself—directly or indirectly—with the depiction of creative or alienated labor. This engagement is largely ideological, and this ideological engagement largely determines its form and content.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Two critics who made full-length discussions of the novel after Dr. Hiren Gohain’s pioneering work are Dr. Krishna Kumar Mishra and Dr. Govinda Prasad Sharma. Dr. Mishra challenges Dr. Gohain’s statement, “Sonia is the real hero of the novel” (Gohain, 2009, p.699), by saying that Nareswar’s presence at the beginning and at the end of the novel is significant; the action moves through him. Dr. Govinda Prasad Sharma also claims that the central question of the novel is why Nareswar couldn’t stay in the tea garden. It’s true that Nareswar is the linking thread of the three societies described in the novel: traditional Assamese rural society, the society of the coolies, and that of the British people in Assam. It’s true that the novel continues for some time even after the disappearance of Sonia. Still, we argue that Nareswar is the pivotal hero of the structure, but Sonia is undoubtedly the thematic hero. Nareswar is related to servielabor, while Sonia is related to productive labor. Thus, exploitation and oppression as consequences of alienated labor and revolt against it

become more conspicuous through Sonia. The novel aims to reveal the dehumanizing effects first of the rural, patriarchal society and then of colonial exploitation. Nareswar has to flee from both, but he is not a rebel. He doesn’t see any problem in the organization of labor in the tea garden. If Sonia had married him, he would have remained there comfortably. It’s only Sonia who can sense the inhumanity and cruelty lurking behind the seemingly green way of life of the coolies.

Dr. Mishra, like many others, agrees that Sonia’s character is a riddle. He thinks that the problem with her character arises from her obsession with her illegitimate and questionable birth. Dr. Govinda Prasad Sharma also says that the mixed blood in her body doesn’t allow her to live comfortably in any of the societies—those of the Sahibs and of the coolies. Dr. Hiren Gohain alone relates the problem of Sonia’s character to imperialist exploitation. Her birth and body themselves are evidence of the cruel and inhuman exploitation by the imperialist rulers. She is angry with her dear fellow beings because they accept this imperialist exploitation as the dictates of destiny. Dr. Gohain unravels the mystery behind her departure from the garden, saying that she has no way out of the chain of circumstances, and she has to accept this poisonous servility (towards both imperialism and traditional patriarchy) as long as she is in that society. So, seeking her own freedom along with Nareswar’s good, she departs. Dr. Gohain convincingly states that Armstrong’s oppression of Sonia’s mother, Mohua, is not simply an individual sin; it is symptomatic of a particular social system. Dr. Gohain thus almost articulates the root of the problem of both Sonia and the novel—oppression by



semi-feudal patriarchy and by imperialist capitalism. But he could have gone one step further: the root of the semi-feudal or capitalist set-up is alienated labor. Thus, Sonia's—and also the novel's—problem lies with alienated labor, not visibly all the time, but as an undercurrent every moment.

Dr. Mishra says, "In the end of *Seuji Pator Kahini*, the tragic tune of fruitless search is echoed." (Mishra, 2001, p. 71) Search for what? He says, "It's a search for true humanity." (Mishra, 2001, p. 87) But what does true humanity consist of? Dr. Mishra doesn't answer clearly. Dr. Govinda Prasad Sharma seems to indicate an answer: "Silently, he (Nareswar) wanted a society where people are simple, where morality is not degenerated, where the value of humanity remains intact." (Sharma, 2014, p. 193) This is a vague answer. Dr. Gohain's answer is clearer: "Through the exposure of cruel oppression and exploitation imperialism unleashed in Indian society and the hypocrisy and oppressive character of the traditional society, the novelist expresses an intense longing and urge for a healthy and complete life." (Gohain, 2000, p. 370) Thus, a healthy and complete life must be free from hypocrisy, cruelty, oppression, and exploitation. We want to add that freedom from these evils is possible only when there is no alienated labor—only in the condition of free, creative labor—simply because the basis of all hypocrisy, cruelty, oppression, and exploitation is alienated labor. The basic hypocrisy of a class society is to rob the worker of his own product and give him wages, which is a false justification of this robbery. Sonia significantly comments, "They are robbers, not Sahibs." (128) Dr. Govinda Prasad Sharma comments, "Here the white managers haven't given

proper wages and proper human status to the laborers." (Sharma, 2014, p. 200) But the problem doesn't lie with wages or status; it lies with snatching away the product of the laborers, alienating them from their product, thereby alienating them from themselves, thus dehumanizing them. Marx criticized capitalism not merely for its unequal distribution of wealth but for perverting labor into forced, alienated, futile labor, which cannot be remedied by better payment; better payment of alienated labor is not the issue—the issue is converting alienated labor into free, creative labor. When Sonia says, "The garden, as it were, impoverishes the body and soul of my brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers day by day, drags them to sin and greed day by day," (214) she hints not only at physical exploitation but also at spiritual exploitation. Thus, Sonia hints—though unconsciously—at the robbery of human essence through the mechanism of alienated labor—and that's a spiritual loss for the laborers.

Dr. Hiren Gohain doesn't explicitly mention alienated labor and its effect on the novel. Of course, his extensive critique of imperialist exploitation indirectly hints at the same. But we disagree with some of his observations. For example, he celebrates the "naturalness" of coolie life, pointing out its "uncontaminated human essence": "The glimpse of primitive life expressed in the collective dance of the tea-garden laborers even today, along with the rhythm of *madol* in the darkness of night, beckons towards an uncontaminated human essence which is complete, gratified, hence healthy and beautiful." (Gohain, 2000, p. 374) Also, "Sexuality



(open and unrestricted) here is a sign of healthy, gratified natural human life." (Gohain, 1997, p. 12)

Let us remember that true human essence is creative labor, from which the workers are deprived. It is not that the laborers lead a natural, essential life which is disturbed by exploitation and oppression; rather, it is exploitation and oppression (elements of alienated labor) that make their life unnatural and lacking in essence. The laborers' revelry, unrestricted sexual life, drinking, dancing, etc., far from being signs of healthy, essential life, are actually signs of life deformed by alienated labor. Thus, the seemingly "lively" aspects of the workers are simply the expression of dehumanized, alienated labor. Intuitively, Sonia feels it, so she doesn't wholeheartedly participate in that life. Both Nareswar and Sonia refrain from the workers' open and unrestricted life, and ultimately, both depart from that life.

As part of this concealment of the role of alienated labor, the author refrains from depicting workers at their workplaces—among the tea plants and in the factory. Very few scenes are set among the tea plants, and only one scene is set inside the factory, and that too at night, when Sonia saw the love-making of two workers inside the factory. No critic so far has noted the general absence of working scenes.

ALIENATION, DEHUMANIZATION DEPICTED IN THE NOVEL

Now let us see how alienation and dehumanization are reflected in the novel.

- a) Marx said that "the devaluation of the world of men is in direct proportion to the

increasing value of the world of things" (Marx, 28). In *Seuji Pator Kahini*, Armstrong "didn't pass order without kicking the coolies with boots, or whipping their bodies" (83). According to Mr. Piper, "Red eyes on babus, whipping the laborers and alert looking of Sahibs yield best quality tea" (237). But Armstrong is distanced from the Rupohijan Tea Estate, or the "present" of the novel, by time, and Mr. Piper by space.

- b) "The object which labor produces—labor's product—confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer... Whatever the product of his labor is, he is not. Therefore, the greater this product, the less is he himself" (Marx, 29).

The tea garden is the product of the labor of the coolies, but it assumes greater importance than they do. Sukhdeo is whipped for going out of the garden and working as a "faltu" (unregistered worker) in another garden, Ouguri Tea Estate. Rotou is severely beaten by Mr. Miller for stealing some tea from the factory. Thus, tea produced by the workers is not theirs. The garden and tea transcend their producers. Thus, the worker is enslaved by the object of his labor. That the product stands alien to the producer and transcends him is dramatized in the "present" of *Seuji Pator Kahini* only in this single scene of chapter thirteen.

- c) "Labor produces wonderful things for the rich—but for the workers it produces privation. It produces palaces—but for the



worker, hovels. It produces beauty—but for the worker, deformity... It produces intelligence, but for the worker, stupidity, cretinism” (Marx, 30). In *Seuji Pator Kahini*, the workers are victims of superstition. They believe that “the trees are possessed by evil spirits. Only after performing puja and sacrificing hens and goats, they could strike at trees with axes” (36). They lack education. Sonia says, “Fooh, why should coolie boys go to school?” (61). Durjon Sardar observes, “The laborers would have committed suicide right at their birth had they been incapable of enjoying life’s laughter and pleasure even in the midst of hundreds of needs” (113). There is no light in the coolie line—“Why those whose life is unbearable because of wants will waste money for kerosene oil for moving from darkness to light?” (136). The mothers lack nourishment, so the babies too are deprived of it—“Milk will form in the breast only if mothers find food to eat!... The money husband and wife earn together is not enough for two meals per day” (203).

- d) “The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working, he does not feel at home... Man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating... and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal” (Marx, 30). The laborers in *Seuji Pator*

Kahini also feel emancipated when they are away from work. “The sun, even before they wake up, brings comfort of emancipation of leave days; the leisure of the workless day increases enthusiasm” (174). Lokhu contrasts pleasure with labor and metaphorically talks about the burning of work: “Let them laugh—they will laugh only for the night. In the morning they will come to pluck the young leaves in order to burn in the fire of the factory” (106). The novel draws its liveliness from scenes depicted outside workplaces: dancing, love-making, quarreling, drinking, etc. The proportion of such scenes in *Seuji Pator Kahini* is so large that they tend to cover up the sufferings of the coolies. *Seuji Pator Kahini* depicts only one scene inside the factory, when Sonia is looking for Powali Babu. Even this scene doesn’t depict laborers at work.

- e) Such alienation leads to dehumanization, which implies death-in-life. In *Seuji Pator Kahini*, the vipers of death, decay, and melancholy lurk behind the colorful flowers of love, fun, mirth, and amusement. Deaths of the palace-maid Sahita, Jogen’s widow, and social worker Naren; the murder of Armstrong; separations between Mohuwa and Feku, Prema and Aloti, and Sonia and Nareswar; the departure of Nareswar from his village, Sonia’s departure from the garden, and Nareswar’s final departure from the garden—all these cumulatively build up the gloom that continually disturbs the sunny surface of the story. But *Seuji Pator*



Kahini describes deaths, murders, rapes, etc., more as things of the past.

IMPACT OF IDEOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION OF ALIENATED LABOR ON NOVELISTIC ASPECTS:

Now we may turn to a discussion of the impact of the ideological representation of alienated labor on the novelistic aspects of the text. It is seen that, as far as the condition and effects of alienated labor are concerned, *Seuji Pator Kahini* shows a tendency more to conceal than to reveal. This is rooted in the novel's ideology, which determines the following aspects of the novel.

TITLE

Let us discuss the title first. Many critics appreciate the title *Seuji Pator Kahini* as, for them, it is an ironic title—the connotation of *Seuji Pator Kahini* (green leaves) conceals the disturbing facts of oppression, exploitation, suffering, and pain of the toiling people. Irony is indirect rather than direct, concealing rather than revealing. This is in keeping with the whole structure and texture of the novel, which works more to hide than to reveal. The novel promises to explore and expose the sufferings of the toiling mass, but ultimately it appears evasive; it takes great care to bypass alienated labor and show us the “green leaves” of a vibrant life. It fails to do so; it can neither show nor hide. Ideology makes every attempt to hide what truth wants to show, and truth tears up every covering with which ideology tries to hide it. The title also wants to foreground refreshing “nature,” pushing “man” aside, but man finds his way back into the title through “kahini” (story). “Kahini” is always human; only humans may have kahinis. Thus, both the novel and its title are refractive, not reflective.

THE BEGINNING AND THE END

The beginning and the end of the novel are not focused on the toiling mass, that is, the tea-garden laborers. *Seuji Pator Kahini*, supposed to be a novel based on the life of the coolies, begins with the manager of Nahoroni Tea Estate, Rountree Miller, and his wife, Elly Seymour. They are on their way back to the estate, but have to stop inside the forest as the engine of their car fails to function. A little later, Nareswar, a wayfarer, meets them. Thus, the beginning, as well as the first chapter, does not introduce any coolie character, any producer of “seuji pat.” What is more, in this labor-based novel, the first laboring scene is noticed as late as Chapter Twelve.

Seuji Pator Kahini ends with the departure of Nareswar, which is preceded by the departure of the heroine, Sonia. Nareswar is an outsider, and Sonia is born of a British Sahib and a coolie woman. Thus, like the beginning, the end also does not feature or focus on a truly coolie character.

Seuji Pator Kahini begins in the evening and ends at midnight, suggesting that the life of the coolies will remain unchanged.

THE MAIN PROTAGONISTS

Do the main protagonists of the novel come from the producers of the green leaves? *Seuji Pator Kahini* is widely acclaimed as the first Assamese novel to deal with the life of the tea-garden laborers. But, surprisingly, the novel appears unwilling to have its hero and heroine from this group. The heroine, Sonia, is both attached to and detached from this group, probably because she carries in her body both the blood of a coolie woman and that of a British Sahib. The hero, Nareswar, is an outsider. He belongs



to the mainstream Assamese society and is not a permanent dweller of the garden. His stay in the garden is short-lived. The story of Nareswar–Sonia is foregrounded while the tea-garden laborers form only the background; the laborers are offered conspicuously less space in the novel.

HISTORICITY

Seuji Pator Kahini tries to remain ahistorical. It describes the story of only one generation of the laborers. A few past generations are mentioned, but not dramatized in the “present” of the novel. And there is none in this generation who has the necessary enlightenment to grasp the situation, to have a voice of protest, and to lead their people against the exploitations ushered in by the condition generated by alienated labor. Sonia instinctively perceived her situation, but her perception is largely indistinct, very personal, and fails to pave the way for revolutionary leadership. This indistinct perception, divorced from action, leaves her melancholic and prevents her from attaching herself to her own people. Finally, she leaves them and goes out of the garden in search of some personal, “separate” peace or solution.

Historical sense is impossible without a sense of change, which *Seuji Pator Kahini* does not have. The ahistorical nature of *Seuji Pator Kahini* can be further demonstrated with other evidence. Not only is *Seuji Pator Kahini* content with the drama of only one unchanged generation, but it also does not reveal any clues to the exact historical period when this generation lived.

WORKERS' UNION

There is no trace of a labor union in *Seuji Pator Kahini*. Amalendu Guha's *Planter Raj to Swaraj* tells us that workers' unions in the tea estates of Assam had not been formed until 1939–40. A 1951 novel, *Seuji Pator Kahini*, which does not refer to any historical date, could have chosen to delineate the formation of such unions. Ideological withdrawal from depicting the coolies' struggle and development compelled it to shun this opportunity.

FINDINGS

To conclude, we have seen that *Seuji Pator Kahini* exposes the condition and effects of alienated labor primarily through suggestions. It tends to make the condition of alienated labor less conspicuous and lacks the perception of the true human significance of “creative labor.” How the workers fight back against the condition of alienated labor is deliberately concealed by the novel. Thus, there are “gaps,” “silences,” and “absences” in the novel. Pierre Macherey thought that such textual “absences” are symptoms of ideological repressions of the contents in the text's own “unconscious” (Abrams, 151). That the producers of the “seuji pat” are relegated to the background is an outcome of such ideological repression, which determines other novelistic aspects as well.

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