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The Sociolinguistic Significance of Regional Dialects in the Novels of Rebati Mohan Dutta Choudhury

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Abstract

This study explores the strategic implementation of regional dialects—specifically the Kamrupi and Goalpariya varieties of Assamese—in the literary works of Sheelabhadra, a notable figure in Assamese literature. Contrasting the common emphasis on Standard Colloquial Assamese (SCA) in mainstream literature, Sheelabhadra's narratives are recognized for their embrace of "linguistic realism." This research utilizes sociolinguistic frameworks to dissect three primary functions of dialect within Sheelabhadra's oeuvre: (i) Identity Construction: The dialect acts as a significant marker of belonging and creates a dichotomy between rural and urban identities. It shapes how characters are perceived in their relationships to place and community, elucidating the tensions inherent in the rural-urban divide. (ii) Sociopolitical Resistance: Sheelabhadra's work leverages non-standard dialects as instruments of resistance against the dominance of a singular literary language. This highlights the broader sociopolitical implications of language choice and its role in fostering inclusivity within literary discourse. (iii) Emotional Resonance: The use of the "mother tongue" fosters a heartfelt evocation of nostalgia and intimacy, particularly in the portrayal of the Brahmaputra Valley. This emotional connection enriches the landscapes depicted in his novels, making them resonate deeply with readers. The findings indicate that Sheelabhadra's employment of dialect transcends mere "local color" or comic elements, which are often pitfalls in regional literature. Instead, he utilizes dialect as a nuanced narrative strategy that interrogates themes of class, caste, and communal narratives. The paper asserts that Sheelabhadra's novels serve as crucial sociolinguistic documents that connect marginalized voices with the broader literary canon, establishing a dialogue around regional identity and societal dynamics in Assamese culture.

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1. Introduction

Rebati Mohan Dutta Choudhury (1924–2008), known as Sheelabhadra, was a prominent figure in Assamese literature and academia. Born in Gauripur, Dhubri, Assam, he excelled in mathematics, graduating from Rongpur Carmichael College (at present Bangladesh) and earning a post-graduate degree from Calcutta University in 1946. His varied career included teaching, journalism, and a position at Assam Engineering College. He began writing later in life, with his first short story *Abhiyog*, published in 1964, and became renowned for works centered around his hometown. His notable contributions include the short story collection "*Madhupur Bahudur*," and novels such as "*Madhupur aru Tarangini*" and "*Abichinna*." Dutta Choudhury received several awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1994. He is remembered for his insightful writing that reflects the evolution of Assamese society.

Rebati Mohan Dutta Choudhury, known as Sheelabhadra, is a significant figure in 20th-century Assamese literature, recognized for his realistic and psychological narratives. His minimalist writing style emphasizes the inner lives of the middle class and reflects his outsider-insider perspective of Assamese society. Prodhani (2009) [3] mentioned that "Sheelabhadra belongs to a different geo-cultural locale among contemporary Assamese story writers. He draws on the pastoral disquiet landscape and continues to delve deep into the recesses of his memories of a home far removed from the proximity of his physical reality, yet

he remains a spirited troubadour traversing the bucolic terrains within, along the rhythms of Madhupur musings-his reinvented home-fashioned by his imaginations.” (p21). Sheelabhadra’s atheistic humanism, exploration of home and belonging, and concise storytelling defines his unique literary identity. His notable works include the interconnected stories in "Madhupur," which shifted Assamese literature's focus from rural to small-town life, and "Anushthan," which offered an analytical take on human relationships. "Agomon" addresses themes of memory and the conflict between modernity and tradition. His contributions mark a transition in Assamese prose towards modernism and realism, granting a voice to the displaced and introducing psychological realism, thus influencing future generations of writers. His novels illustrate the socio-linguistic impact of the partition, notably through three key aspects:

- The Dialect of Displacement captures the Mymensinghia dialect of refugees who settled in Assam, showcasing language evolution amidst uprooting.
- Linguistic Realism contrasts previous formal Assamese literature by incorporating colloquialisms and code-switching, reflecting societal power dynamics.
- His novels, like Madhupur Bahudur, chronicle the "Small Town" identity of Gauripur, emphasizing the importance of regional variations in Assamese language and identity.

1.1. Review of Literature

On the basis of literary survey the researcher has come across the with the following related works and these are:

Saikia’s (2003) ^[4] Sahityabad Baichitrya in his work he argues that Sheelabhadra’s use of dialect is not merely for "local color" but serves as a tool for realism. Saikia notes that the transition from Standard Assamese to regional dialects in his novels reflects the internal psyche and class status of his characters. By utilizing the specific linguistic nuances of the Goalpara or Lower Assam regions, Sheelabhadra grounds his stories in a gritty, tangible reality. This adherence to authentic speech patterns allows the reader to experience the setting as a living, breathing space.

Prodhani’s (2009) ^[3] “An Imaginary Haven- Madhupur or Macondo: Reaching out to Sheelabhadra’s World” in his work he has mentioned that Madhupur Bohudoor is a celebrated literary work by Sheelabhadra that mythically rediscovers his native homestead, assigning cultural legality to a locale within Assam's narrative. As a master storyteller, Sheelabhadra portrays his characters with remarkable clarity and revives the lost wisdom of the area. His stories evoke nostalgia without sentimentality, blending urbanity with passion, and humor with engagement, resulting in a work that is both intimate and universally appealing.

Hazarika’s (2020) ^[2] “Magical Realism in the Short Stories of Sheelabhadra” in her paper she has stated that Sheelabhadra engages readers by depicting contemporary society and its collective aspirations, encompassing both positive and negative aspects of human actions through his narratives. His stories are primarily set in Gauripur, located in the undivided Goalpara district of Assam, yet they capture the interest of readers beyond geographical limitations.

1.2. Objectives

Proposed research objectives for studying Rehati Mohan Dutta Choudhury's works focus on the intersection of literary analysis and sociolinguistic theory, particularly in the context of the Goalpara region. The objectives are categorized as follows

- Dialect as a Tool for Geographic and Cultural Identity
- How did he use Social Hierarchies and Class Stratification?
- Memory Fortification and Nostalgia
- The Authentic representation of socioeconomic status in Sheelabhadra’s work
- Identify non-standard Assamese varieties that convey a sense of place, document specific regional dialect features, and analyze code-switching between Standard Assamese and regional dialects.
- Other miscellaneous features of Sheelabhadra’s novels.

1.3. Methodology

Analyzing Rehati Mohan Dutta Choudhury's work, known as Sheelabhadra, necessitates a methodology that harmonizes literary criticism with linguistic detail, emphasizing authentic depictions of the Goalpara region and Brahmaputra valley. A qualitative and descriptive research design is recommended, focusing on the nuances of language and cultural identity. The primary data collection involves a close reading of selected novels, with attention to dialect extraction and contextual mapping of dialect usage among characters. The secondary data will be collected in the form of library works from Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University, journals, newspaper magazine etc will be focused systematically.

1.4. Significance of the Study

The research significance of studying the sociolinguistic nuances in the works of Rehati Mohan Dutta Choudhury’s works underscores the interplay between literary realism and linguistic identity through four main aspects:

- The blending of Standard Assamese and regional dialects enhances dialectology.
- Code-switching illustrates power dynamics, with dialects reflecting intimacy and cultural ties in Assamese society.
- His novels incorporate regional dialects to protect community heritage, bridging Linguistics and Folklore Studies against standardization.
- By employing regional dialects, he elevates marginalized viewpoints, affirming the significance of their linguistic variations in literature.

2. The Sociolinguistic Significance of Regional Dialects in the Novels of Sheelabhadra

Sheelabhadra, the pen name of Rehati Mohan Dutta Choudhury, plays a distinctive role in Assamese literature through his adept use of regional dialects, particularly those of the Lower Assam region. His novels, like Madhupur and Tarua Kadam, serve as linguistic archives showcasing the evolving identities caught between tradition and modernity. He elevates Kamrupi and Goalpariya dialects to literary status, grounding his narratives in geographic authenticity

and creating a "liminal space" reflective of hybrid cultures. Sheelabhadra underscores social hierarchies and class stratification through diglossia, giving marginalized voices dignity in their native dialects. His work also preserves regional rich proverbs and oral traditions while resisting linguistic hegemony, advocating for inclusivity in the understanding of Assamese identity amid Northeast India's diverse ethnic landscape. Let us discuss the sociolinguistic significance of regional dialects in the novels of Sheelabhadra in the following points:

- **Dialect:** The Voice of Cultural Soul: Sheelabhadra's writing effectively utilizes dialects, particularly Goalpariya and Mymensingh, to convey cultural identity in his works, notably in the novel "Madhupur". The dialect adds depth to the characters and fosters a sense of belonging that standardized Assamese fails to capture. Through local idioms and phonetic nuances, the dialect creates a rich sensory experience reflective of the Brahmaputra valley's diverse culture.
- **The Authentic representation of socioeconomic status:** Sheelabhadra employs dialect to illustrate class and social stratification, contrasting the refined language of the urban elite with the colloquial speech of rural inhabitants, revealing an internal "othering" in society. In "Agomon", this linguistic divide between the protagonist and local villagers highlights the gap between intellectual observation and the realities of the masses, with the laborer's vocabulary reflecting socio-economic conditions linked to land and survival.
- **Memory Fortification and Nostalgia:** Sheelabhadra emphasizes dialect as a means of preserving memory and nostalgia, particularly the East Bengali dialect, which he uses to convey a sense of "home" impacted by Partition. In his narratives, a shift to this dialect when characters reflect on their origins serves as a nostalgic trigger, encapsulating lost landscapes, childhood, and a collective heritage that surpasses political divides.
- **Concise and Fluid:** Sheelabhadra redefined the role of dialect in the novel, moving past its history as a comic trope to give it artistic prestige. By centering his prose on the 'marginalized' tongues of Western Assam, he bridged the gap between local heritage and high literature, preserving these unique linguistic patterns for future generations of readers.
- **Linguistic Hybridity:** Standard" linguistic identity. He seamlessly weaves the textures of various dialects into his narratives, dismantling the hierarchy that often pushes local speech to the margins. In doing so, he proves that the language of the so-called "periphery" is not a simplified version of the center, but a vibrant, resonant tool capable of carrying the full weight of human experience and existential inquiry.

3. Conclusion

Rebati Mohan Dutta Choudhury, known as Sheelabhadra, transformed Assamese literature by using local dialects to vividly capture the social fabric of the Assam-Bengal borderlands and Lower Assam. Hazarika (2020) [2]:"Sheelbhadra, made an invaluable contribution to the arena

of Assamese literature. While reflecting sordid realities of life, his dexterity also lies in literary experimentation. A master creator, Sheelbhadra pens numerous stories in different publications during his lifetime" (p 67). Rebati Mohan Dutta Choudhury, is celebrated in Assamese literature for his connection to Barpeta and Lower Assam. His writings serve as a linguistic bridge, accurately depicting the socio-cultural landscape of the Brahmaputra Valley. He predominantly employs the Kamrupi dialect while using Standard Assamese for narration, incorporating distinct phonological and morphological features that reflect local identity. Through regional dialects, he creates a "sense of place," emphasizing atmospheric realism and social stratification. Characters often engage in code-switching, highlighting their connections to local roots versus formal education. Additionally, his works act as a linguistic archive, documenting vanishing speech and occupational jargon, emphasizing that dialects are vibrant expressions of culture rather than distortions of language.

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