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## Is Fiction a Fact or Fact a Fiction?

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**Abstract:** The study draws an analogy between certain gender specific problems which are perceived by a writer many decades ago through her skillful narration and a research paper that practically confirmed the same issues related to the health of rural women of Rajasthan. It presents how women's suffering is attributed not only to the geographical and economic conditions they are living in, but also to the traditional roles and the social stigma attached to them. It states that gender perspective can no longer be ignored and measures must be taken from female point of view since health issues crippled the girls and women more than men. The study affirms that literature is nothing but reflection of life by comparing fact and fiction.

**Key words:** fiction, reality, health issues, gender perspective.

**Introduction:** The study attempts to demonstrate women's suffering and their health problems in a particular geographical condition that have been described in fiction which are recently realized by governments and social workers in India. The paper draws an analogy between certain gender specific problems which are perceived by a writer many decades ago through her skillful narration and a research paper that practically studied the same issues related to the health of rural women of Rajasthan. Here, the 'fiction' is illustrated with reference to an Asomiya short story *Desert Nymph*, translated into English in 1999 and the 'fact' is a research study entitled "Water and Sanitation- A Gender Perspective" by the scholars of Amity University which was published in the International Journal of Innovative Research and Development (IJIRD) in July 2015. Interestingly, the translated story *Desert Nymph* is originally published in Asomiya as "Morubhumit Menaka" almost two decades



ago. Though its year of publication is not found, it must have been published before 1999, its year of translation.

The writers were frequently criticized for lies, false and ‘cooked up’ imaginative stories. Apparently, the word ‘fiction’ means literature in the form of prose, novels and stories that describes imaginary events and people, and is synonymous with words like fabrication, lies, fibs, concoction, untruth, falsehood etc. Whether the stories and the novels are accurate or false is a constant topic of argument for certain people and these disputes often influence the readers consciously or unconsciously. Some readers claim that several writings are nonsensical, absurd and untruthful and can be harmful and that is how some writings are getting banned. However, this study does not have any relevance for such discussion, but it only points out a unique resemblance between a story and reality. Despite the criticism, most of the writers prove that literature is reflection of life. In fact, real life is more complex than fiction.

In this context, Mark Twain’s saying “Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't” (*Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World-1897*) is worth mentioning. Considering the possibilities, fiction writers do lie, since they have to present the crude reality in a most sophisticated form as a part of their presentation. Though imaginative, they convey a curious truth, which can only be expressed in a veiled and concealed manner. Thus, it is sometimes charged that fiction is nothing but a juggling of words, a gibberish fantasy and a gratuitous fabrication. On the contrary, this study asserts that the life’s fiction is emanated from reality. And, it refers to a certain real, social, geographical and economic problem by juxtaposing fact and fiction. The short story analyzed here, is not only a reflection of the society but also serves as a corrective mirror where people can look at themselves and find the need for positive change. Often, it is important to take a close look at some works of literature, in order to understand how literature actually reflects the society. Moreover, the short stories are often considered as time-pass fiction, bed time stories and grandma tales. To be blunt, the story “Desert Nymph” referred to here is neither a



dessert to pass on sweet time nor a Nymph (beautiful maiden) to sing lullabies to make readers fall asleep. In fact, it is a bitter pill to swallow and certainly readers find themselves in shock and awake for some time. And, no grandma can imagine this kind of a story even in her wildest fantasy. Before getting into the fiction, the fact is presented first.

**The Fact:** In July 2015, a research study entitled “Water and Sanitation- A Gender Perspective” is published in the International Journal of Innovative Research and Development (IJIRD) by Dr. Sangeeta Poswal and Thushara Roy of Amity University of Rajasthan, Rajasthan, India. Their study throws light on sanitation crisis in Thar Desert of Rajasthan. It states that the absence of proper hygiene and sanitation is the chief cause of reproductive tract infections (RTI) in females where the former is primarily associated with the unavailability of water. Their study showcases the gravity of the situation by examining the functionality of various government programs in Rajasthan related to water availability and sanitation and considers a few case studies by interviewing people in a village called Lakshmangarh, in Sikar district of Rajasthan.

The paper asserts, “In every household, the women shoulder the responsibility of maintaining the hygiene, sanitation and fetching water for the family. Many of the rural households lack proper awareness on adequate sanitation. Moreover, culture and beliefs, along with female illiteracy, make them unaware of the health hazards that they have to deal with on a daily basis. Women suffer from inflammation, itching, soreness and odorous discharge. Lack of hygiene plays a big part in transmission-sharing bathrooms or toilets of poor hygienic condition. A case study on Dausa district of Rajasthan (2012) supports this as it was found out that around 70-80 percent of rural females suffer from the above illnesses. An interview with health service providers and other health agencies threw light on the serious sanitation issues that has crippled the female health. Rural girls suffer from poor menstrual hygiene.”

Their study also suggests all public and private institutions along with people work jointly to mitigate the problem on development goals like water and sanitation and



recommends focusing on the close link between water management, sanitation systems, waste management and health education. It quotes Craig Mokhiber (Chief of the Human Rights Office Development and Economic and Social Issues Branch) who says that the stigma around menstrual hygiene is the violation of human rights and it demands attention, not just of the human rights community, but of health professionals, governments, activists, economists and broader society at large. Finally, the study concludes hoping for a better quality of life for human sustenance.

**The Fiction:** Arupa Patangia Kalita's short story, *Desert Nymph* primarily depicts the suffering of women having different life styles i.e. urban rich, middle class and poor desert women. Dr.Emily, from an aristocratic family, gets a shock of her life at the sight of the extreme living conditions of the desert women in Rajasthan.

The protagonist, Emily, is very sensitive, tender hearted and committed gynecologist. As a part of her duty, Emily has to attend a medical relief camp along with her chief Dr. Kapoor and a medical group for fifteen days at Kishangarh village in the desert of Rajasthan. She realizes the value of water and tries to cope with the situation by not taking bath. For the first time in her life she experiences the scarcity of water in the desert. During the day, there is no single woman who comes to their medical camp. Later, the doctors are told by the village headman that the womenfolk will not be coming for check up. Though, the doctors argue at their best to convince the village headman there is no use. Therefore, Emily and her chief decide to go to see the women in villages. This narration reminds readers of the fact in Craig Mokhiber words: "stigma around menstrual hygiene is the violation of human rights and it demands attention ...".

Emily is dumbstruck with terror when she sees the desert women who are like a heap of dirty rags. They are like bedraggled ghost-like creatures. As Emily starts medical checkups, she is stupefied to see cuts and bruises on their hands and feet and their skin, shriveled up like burnt potato jackets and their teeth as black as any animal and hair never



touched by water or oil. A horrible foul smell emanates from the women's bodies. Emily is awestruck at the pitiable and miserable conditions of those desert women.

Despite the doctors' gentle treatment and efforts, the desert women are very uncooperative for gynecological examinations. When the doctors beginning to enquire about their gynecological issues, some women remain mute and some run away. The women's genitals are infested with blood, puss filled boils and wounds. The women's private parts are rotten with infections. Emily's heart breaks when she comes to know that these women are aged between twenty four and thirty. Most of them are terribly anemic and have miscarriages. Emily is aghast to see the women walk five to fifteen miles every day with their boiled, infested bodies in search of water. She learns that the women's wounds are caused by unhygienic conditions which are aggravated by water scarcity.

Emily examines a thirteen year old girl, who suffers from night blindness due to vitamin deficiency which is further aggravated by prolonged hours of stitching. The girl objects to having her genitals tested, but emulating her chief, Emily calms her down and finds the skin of her vagina peeled off. She finds something stuck there. She took it out with a pair of forceps; it was a blood-soaked piece of earth! (Kalita 30).

She cannot digest the fact that poverty and water scarcity can force women to use pieces of earth as sanitary napkins. She is unable to believe that sanitary napkins are an unimaginable luxury for them. The next day, Emily cuts all her cotton dresses to give to the women so that they can use them as sanitary napkins. But she is reminded by her chief: When people don't have water to drink, washing clothes is out of the question. When they don't have clothes to wear, they can't throw them away (31).

Later in the evening, Emily is surprised to see all these women singing and dancing. Finding Emily speechless, Dr. Kapoor exclaims of course, they are alive, and they are living! (31). Emily finds that the cotton rags she has given them are transformed into new beautifully designed dresses.



However, Emily's earlier perception of 'vision of the desert' like desert belle, beautiful embroidered Banjaran dresses etc. is crushed and shattered into pieces with the harsh experiences of reality. Her ophthalmologist boy friend, who is also in the medical camp, buys a dress for her from a famous shop, where foreign tourists and fashion houses buy the richly embroidered dresses made by the desert women. She is unable to wear them as she is stirred badly by the terrible conditions of the women who are behind those beautiful designs. During the end of their camp, Emily is presented ornately embroidered dresses made by the desert women. She is still unable to admire the beautiful work as she sees blood and pus in every thread of the dress. She is haunted by the thoughts of that ghost like creatures with severe gynecological problems and lack of basic needs. She is troubled with sleeplessness and nightmares with many unanswerable questions like, "for how many years have these women been living like this and how long would it take for desert women to start "living?".

Thus, the desert women's suffering is described elaborately by the writer Arupa Patangia Kalita. She depicts their lives amidst the extreme hostile circumstances, hardships and the most unhygienic conditions, which are confirmed by the research. All the points established in the research found a faithful representation in the story much earlier. It is also significant that though the drought condition is very common in the desert, but its effects are more in women than men.

The village Lakshingarh in the fact has become Kishingarh in the fiction of the same state. May be it is a sweet lie that the story describes that some women are blissfully unaware of the fact that they are enduring such a miserable existence. It is hard to digest the fact that poverty and water scarcity can force women to use pieces of earth as sanitary napkins; it is hard to digest the fact that sanitary napkins are an unimaginable luxury for those desert women. Though Emily gives all her cotton dresses to use them as sanitary napkins, the desert women transform them into some new dresses, but not as the sanitary napkins. The



story ends with a note that like Cacti, they possess the inner strength to face hardships, and to live their life as it comes despite their miseries.

Another character in the story *Desert Nymph* is Shobha, who is a classic case of many show-biz models who suffer from 'Bulimia nervosa' in real life. Shobha, a close friend of Dr. Emily, chooses to follow risky methods to maintain her desired measurements by keeping her health at stake. In order to be a super model and rich, she tortures her body to maintain 36-24-36 measurements. With a view to enhance her physical beauty by augmenting her breasts she injects hormones though she is aware of the side effects- sores on the face, messed up periods and breast cancer. She believes that her vital statistics are more important than her blood pressure levels and hemoglobin counts. She chooses the deadliest method to keep slim - gorging of food and throwing it up, just to maintain a voluptuous body. Her character and life represents another bitter truth, which is real and most common in today's world of glamour.

**Conclusion:** The desert women's suffering seems to spring from the fact that they are women. The story examined here bears testimony to this fact. The desert women suffer primarily by virtue of being women. The extent of suffering in women is such that 'woman' has become synonymous with suffering. For women, the main causes of suffering may be attributed not only to the geographical and economic conditions they are living in, but also to the traditional views and the social stigma attached to them. Even the researchers prove that the health issues crippled the females more than men and many rural girls and women suffer from poor menstrual hygiene and Reproductive Tract Infections. It is also confirmed that the gender perspective can no longer be ignored and measures must be taken from the female point of view. It may be argued that the geographical conditions and drought do not have any discrimination between men and women, but its effects are doubled and intensified in the case of women. However, the situation persists not only in India, as many nations also suffer from the issues related to the lack of water and poor sanitization. A society cannot claim a civilized society unless it considers health and hygiene as a primary right for all its members.





Therefore, the juxtaposition of Fact and Fiction (literature) confirms that “literature is a mirror of life”. Literature indeed reflects the society, its good values and its ills. Literature faithfully mirrors the evils of the society with a view to making the society realize its mistakes and make amends. None can deny its constructive role as it projects the virtues or good values in the society for people to emulate. It is apt to quote the famous Chinese writer Gao Xingjian’s words spoken while delivering his Nobel Lecture in the year 2000. He says, “To subvert is not the aim of literature, its value lies in discovering and revealing what is rarely known, little known, thought to be known but in fact not very well known of the truth of the human world. It would seem that truth is the unassailable and most basic quality of literature”. Thus, literature is not only a reflection of the society but also that which serves as an imitation of human action, and often presents a picture of what people think, say and do in the society. It functions as a corrective mirror where individuals can look at themselves and make amendments for a healthy and civilized society.

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- Notes on the writer and the translator:

Arupa Patangia Kalita writes short stories, Novellas and novels for adults as well as for children. She has won a number of awards including the Katha Award for Creative Fiction, the Sarlesh Chandra Das Gupta Sahitya Setu Award and the Baratiya Bhasha Parishad Award. Besides writing features for Asomiya Journals, she also edits a little magazine called Damol. She teaches English Literature at Tangla College, Darrang, Assam.

Bonita Baruah is a journalist with The Times of India, New Delhi and has written several articles. She translates short stories from Asomiya to English.

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