

## INTRODUCTION

Concerns with identity and identity assertions/formations have woven through reflections on the human conditions and social life for a long time from the Upanishadic dictum of “*átmanam viddhi*” (Know Thyself) to the postmodernist self of the de-centred fragmented pastiche, though there has been, unquestionably, in the recent past, a precipitous upsurge in both intellectual and scientific pre-occupation, a plurality of discourses in the subject. Even if for some quarter, “the politics of identity is dead”, in the vast theatre of socio-political contradictions which is the contemporary world strangled by multiple currents of globalization, multiculturalism, neo-religio-ethnic antagonism, and secessionist tendencies, the issue of identity surfaces now and again with a renewed force to become an integral condition of world politik and of the lived experiences of mankind. In the context of contemporary state of world affairs, the issue of identity has ceased to be merely a psycho-philosophical/ontologico-existential quest of an individual self or a creative persona in the subjective level, rather a much broader and expansive entity encompassing a whole range of variables such as the social, the cultural, the gendered, comprising both the subjective as well as the objective manifestations. In order to understand this multifaceted, multidimensional and multi-layered subject as an integral condition of lived experience in a holistic manner, one has to critically probe it in terms of differing epistemologies and socio-political factors. In fact, in the last two decades of the twentieth century, a rigorous intellectual problematization of identity has become central in modern/post-modern discourses such as the post-structural and post-colonial studies, cultural studies, ethnic and gender studies etc. Most significantly, the reflections of such problematization have become visible in the various forms of cultural production and creative endeavours like film studies, literature, fine arts etc. where the individual engaged in such dialectics seem have attempted to devise art either as an interventional strategy/“praxis” or as a cathartic means for sublimation and to channelize in order to symbolically mediate the existential circumstances and historical realities within which they find themselves embedded. In this context, it would be pertinent to recall the observations made by Jorella Andrews:

In the Absent Body, Drew Leder suggests that while our bodies are the most abiding and inescapable presence in our lives, it is primarily in periods or context of dysfunction that they become a thematic object of experience. Something similar might be said concerning questions of identity. For when such questions arise, pertinent and troublesome, they are inevitably symptomatic of some disorder, dis-ease, or desire. On the one hand, they point to certain discontinuities, struggles, anxieties and needs, whether of socio-political or a psychological/soullish nature, in which individuals and groups are variously implicated. On the other hand, they indicate certain insufficiencies within the cultural realms of language, thoughts and representations. Thus, approaches to questions of identity must be multifaceted. It is necessary to engage with critical debates concerning the meaning, implication, and indeed viability, of the term itself. It is also crucial to attend to this topic with a diagnostic eye, to consider the specific, lived conditions in which questions of identity become manifested, to regard them as the effects of certain causes, and consequentially as markers of quite specific social, political and cultural urgencies. (The Third Text Reader, p.135)

Hence, when we speak of identity as the markers of certain socio-political and cultural urgencies, we also have to simultaneously refer to its reflections in the literary and artistic discourses as certain symptomatic reflexology of the socio-politico-cultural currents in the paradigm of arts. For example, this particular relation of reflexology between the paradigm of ‘art’ and ‘society’ comprising all its socio-political-cultural constituents can be understood very well in the artistic renderings of Eugene Delacroix’s “Liberty Leading The People”, Raja Ravi Varma’s “A Galaxy Of Musician” or Assamese artist Tarun Duwara’s “Tatxal” (Loom Or Assamese Weavers) and Muktanath Bordoloi’s “Opium Den”.

“Liberty Leading the People” – French: La Liberté guidant le peuple – (visual 1) is a painting by Delacroix commemorating the July Revolution of 1830, which toppled Charles X of France. A woman personifying Liberty leads the people forward over the bodies of the fallen, holding the tricolour flag of the French Revolution in one hand and brandishing a bayonet. Delacroix depicted Liberty, as both an allegorical goddess-figure and a robust woman of the people. The mound of corpses acts as a kind of pedestal from which Liberty strides, barefoot and bare-breasted, out of the canvas and into the space of the viewer. The Phrygian cap she wears had come to symbolize liberty during the first French Revolution, of 1789-94. The painting has been seen as a marker to the end of the Age of Enlightenment, as many scholars see the end of the French Revolution as the start of the romantic era. The fighters are from a mixture of social classes, ranging from the

upper classes represented by the young man in a top hat, to the revolutionary middle class or (bourgeoisie), as exemplified by the boy holding pistols. Aside from the flag held by Liberty, a second, minute tricolour can be discerned in the distance flying from the towers of Notre Dame. This painting can be seen as attempt at formulating the identity of a new nation state emerging under the magnificent iconic representation of Liberty, the guiding force of the new awakening. Likewise, Raja Ravi Varma's "The Galaxy of Musicians" (visual 2) is a grand visual project of working with the orientalist vision and preconceptions towards a national identity, by building up a national-allegorical imagery of a galaxy of Indian Women of different community, diverse physical appearances and complexions holding different musical instruments. As aptly pointed out by Geeta Kapur, in her article "Representational Dilemmas of a Nineteenth-Century Painter: Raja Ravi Varma" (in her book When Was Modernism):

. . . the galaxy is something in the nature of a prognosis for a national cultural synthesis—the perennial idea of unity in diversity—worked through female/feminine representation, . . . a supposed act of self-representation of a culture via the sensuous body of the woman . . . the covertly allegorized representational schema in Galaxy promotes the self conscious notion of a composite culture that is just emerging . . ." (p.172-73).

"The Galaxy" is a fine example of a nineteenth century painter and perhaps the first modernist artist of modern Indian Art Raja Ravi Varma's symbolic reflexivity to socio-political and cultural urgency to formulate the identity of an emerging nation, in keeping to the immediate prevalent notion on the forms of otherness within the colonial sensibility. Tarun Duwara's "Loom" (visual 3) depicts a scene around the loom where few Assamese women are seen helping the weaver meanwhile gossiping among themselves. The nature at the backdrop and the women engaged in weaving seems to be a take-off from the Gandhian comment that "Assamese women weave heaven in their loom" which became a significant marker of Assamese cultural Identity and communitarian signification. Muktanath Bordoloi's "Opium Den" (visual 4) is an epitaphic rendering of decaying life, a premonition of death. On the part of the artist it is a bold portrayal of the colonial exploitation and suffering from a pro-Marxist stand, positioned in support of the exploited proletariat. Through this socio-political comment on the prevalent immediate Assamese life Muktanath simultaneously attempts to critique the crisis of identity in Assam in the colonial period. Through the example of these

artistic renderings sited from different international, national and regional contexts we can see the interplay of art and dynamics of identity.

Now contextualizing the issue of identity within the pan-Indian scenario and in particular in a peripheral pocket like Assam, one observes that the enlarged socio-political state of affairs have become increasingly besieged by the politics of identity emanating from the awakening of ethno-cultural consciousness and assertion of ethnic interest. In a state like Assam inhabited by over two hundred ethnic groups unfolding a unique mosaic of cultural diversity, identity has become an issue for real politik and intellectual dialectics like never before. As such, Assam as a postcolonial peripheral pocket of India manifests a varied range of modernist aporias and turbulences. These turbulences manifest themselves in a myriad of forms. If at times it is expressed as a sense of resentment at the state of marginalisation by the greater whole, whose extreme form takes shape in the secessionist tendencies, at other it manifests a state of stasis or torpor afflicted by a maladic sense of alienation, cowering contraction and identity crisis. Moreover, less extreme though not necessarily less violent expressions of resentment by the ethnic peoples against the regional mainstream are even more numerous. On other occasions, the quest for identity may take up revivalist forms that extol the nostalgic evocation of a pure authentic past/tradition that is often a construct or an appropriation of certain interests and desires. Loaded with such inner discrepancies and contraventions, one can say that Assam can truly be a case of Jorella Andrewsque definition of “dis-ease” with regard to identity pertaining to certain specific social, political and cultural urgency. But by invoking the Jorella Andrewsque definition of identity as “dis-ease”, one is not making an assumption that the voices heard are merely a cacophony of blended nihilism, chaos or malady. It is also a terrain of a throbbing tendency of art to evolve as a transgressive energy to capture the voices of “other” – the voices of the marginal emerging from the sub-streams. The major task required here is the mapping of these voices and to make an assessment of the quintessential character, the process of the making and unmaking and the positive and negative aspects of the entire phenomenon. In the broader context it would help in taking a stock of the various regional manifestations of the modern Indian Art and the driving issues and ideas with regard to the question of identity in a holistic manner.

Hence, in keeping with the foregoing, I propose to critically read the issue of identity – the being and becoming of it; along with a mapping of the reflections of it in

the various modes of art production, which can indeed be of immense interest and relevance for art discourse in specific and for other branches of cultural studies in general.

Probing into the concerned project I propose, firstly, to problematize the very concept of identity and its markers by taking into account the various aspects of the construction/deconstruction, formations/deformations to examine the ontological nature of identity and to see whether it is inherent or evolved. As Ticio Escobar has pointed out (in “Identity and Myth Today”), identity can be discussed by three competing models according to which historically, identity has been thought – an ontological (essentialising) model, an oppositional model and one taken to mark our present concept of culture where concept of identity is necessarily plural and shifting. Various theoretical formulations by thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, Stuart Hall, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and others shall also have to be taken into account for this purpose. It would be pertinent to take an interdisciplinary approach by examining various discourses from the Human Genome project to anthropological findings along with various epistemological positions like the realist/constructivist/ psycho-analytical/post-modernist etc.

Secondly, substrating on the ground of theoretical formulations a historical mapping of various art movements and ideologies that substantiate this issue as the essential ingrain of their praxis to resist any form of hegemonic aggression shall also be taken up (read – Art of the woman, Gay, Coloured, South Asian Diaspora and other minority groups). Contextualising this attempt in the pan Indian scenario would enable one to make a comparative analysis and link up these issues with the art scene of Assam. As one can see in the context of pan Indian scenario, various sporadic instances of artistic reflections about identity makes an interesting reading. The ideological empathy of Bengal School with the nationalist discourse to formulate the identity of the Indian nation or a pan Asian aesthetics is one such instance. Though it needs further problematizing, Girish Shahane has attempted to map three phases in the history of modern Indian Art while delving into the issue of identity. The first represent the universal humanism of artists like Akbar Padamsee, Jehangir Sabavala; the second phase led by the generations of the 1970s when identity is seen in distinctly social terms where class and physical locations are integral with selfhood. The third phase is represented by the artists of the 1990s where the notion of self becomes more fluid, less integrated and can encompass

biography, fantasy and political statement all at once. Herein the socially defined identity gets dissolved and the unitary and expansive space, which had hitherto dominated painting, is often replaced by a patchwork of juxtapositions. Elements within compositions might be locatable in space and time but do not necessarily share those features with their neighbours. Most artists of this phase have experimented with the self-portrait, a form seldom seen in India previously. The theatrical and fanciful art highlighted in the way they depict themselves. These artists of the third phase have been collectively called Generation i by Girish Shahane because they deal with identity in an intellectual, ironic manner, imitating images rather than the world at large. In case of Assam the engagement with identity seems to be an admixed manifestation of the second and third phases of the pan Indian scenario with a predominance of the second phase traits. Herein the geo-political context perhaps plays a vital role with a seeming tension of various contested notions like ethnicity or hybridity accompanied by conflicting aesthetics or different approaches like the modernist or post modernist. As such in the modern art scenario of Assam, political reflexivity seems to be the quintessential concern. Closely intermingled with the element of political reflexivity is a recent upsurge of dialectics with the consciousness of identity. Here, the issue of identity is an intellectual concern among the artists either as a manifestation of the ethnic/cultural/racial in collective level or an ontological exploration of the subjective identity of an artistic personae or creative self. The issue of identity in this context is indeed very complex, multi-layered and multi-dimensional. At one point it becomes a quest of an identity afflicted by existential conflicts of modern and post-modern conditions, at other levels, it is an acute awareness of one's ethnicity. Artists like Shobha Brahma and Neelpawan Baruah have explored the awareness of ethnicity with a folkloristic inclination, motifs and myths from their distinctive cultural background. As some artists are engaged with the issues of ethnicity, some others like Munindra Narayan Bhattacharjee have attempted to question the very notion of one's authentic ethnic identity. In the process they have attempted to comment upon the process of hybridization, of appropriations, of formations and deformations in a culture. In the context of modern art, the 'modern' pre-supposes a unique individual, an original autonomous authentic artistic self, whereas the post-modern questions the very notion of identity and talks of pastiche, and schizophrenia of postmodern temporality. Herein the identity is fragmented, multiple, de-centred and conflicting. Artists such as Rajkumar

Majinder, Kishore Kumar Das, Dadul Chaliha and others have attempted to explore the ontological issue of subjective identity/creative self through these varied approaches. It is herein worth mentioning that these approaches of dialectics on identity mostly seem to be pro-active in the individual rather than the collective level. It is also observed that the most predominant trend of the identitarian discourse is evident in the context of community seen as a distinct culture group. Artists like Shobha Brahma, Maneshwar Brahma, Debananda Ulup, Shiv Prasad Marar and others are representative of their individual cultural/ethnic group to which they belong. Though most of the artists so far mentioned belong to the younger generation, this process of delving into the dialectics of identity emerged long ago in the third decade of last century. Artists like Pratap Baruah, Mukta Nath Bordoloi, and Suren Bordoloi represent the early phase of modernism in Assam who attempted to formulate a definite schema of Assamese identity by catering to the various ideals and models from the past and also from the vision of Assam as a land of unique culture and heritage. But on the whole the overwhelming political awareness that has become evident in art is a recent phenomenon which thrived in the last two decades. Moreover this concern for politics of identity both in the collective and subjective level has given to another genre of art that addresses the issues of gender identity. Though woman writing concerned with the issues of feminism evolved as a significant subtext within the greater fold of identity literature decades ago in Assam, art with feminist concern thrived in the last decade of the twentieth century and within a short span has become a dominant genre in contemporary art. A group of women artists like Lutfa Akhtar, Sanchita Gogoi, Paranbanti Gogoi, Niva Devi, Aditi Chakraborty, Monica Devi and others have been engaged either in the psycho-philosophical quest of a mystic feminine self or questioning the existential predicament of a female subject within a patriarchy. It is interesting to note that apart from the women artists, few of their male co-professionals also seem to be involved in such feminist discourse. To cite an example, M. H. Barbhuyan has taken up the case of the Muslim women of the Barak Valley in Assam. All these critical engagements with regard to the dialectics of gendered identity comprise a significant part of the proposed study.

As can be seen, exploring identity has been a long standing pre-occupation with artists, this has especially been so, since the new social movements began in the western art scene during the late 1960s and 1970s. Artists associated with these movements sought to dismantle the stability of identity construction associated with modernism.

They also sought to address the act of re-framing their own identities, articulating the political through the personal. In the process identity politics again surfaced as a predominant issue in the decade within Cultural Studies, which dominated the late 1980s and the 1990s. It is noteworthy that this concern with the politics of identity has over the years become somewhat institutionalized, and de-radicalised. Many of the artists or those from the identity politics groups marginalized because of their sexuality/ethnicity/nationality or class are again searching for newer, more potent and more activist ways by which to articulate their identity concern. The very notions like sexuality or ethnicity have become increasingly complicated and problematized. Some artists and theorists such as Amelia Jones<sup>1</sup> have opined that it is vital to address and theorise identity in way that accommodates the inter-sectionality of one's positions. These involve not only interrogating all the received ways of understanding one self, but also the ways by which, one is understood by others. In a contemporary world, characterized by highly technology-centric global capitalism and a resurgent religio-racial fundamentalism, any critique on identity seems to be defined not by a single position but gets inflected by a whole range of variables or a multiple critique. Hence, at this moment seeking a new direction in the entire process seems to be the main concern of the dialectics on identity. Juxtaposition of differing epistemologies, ideologies and art scenarios (international/national/regional) to critically take an account of the various contours of the issue might help in understanding the pattern. My work would be an attempt within this paradigm and trace the ontology and politics of the issue taken. As for the political aspect of the issue, though several questions such as the issue of social space for art, or the issue of community and art practice can be taken into account, I would like to focus on the dynamics of identity in relation to art activism. As already mentioned on the basis of my earlier studies about the modern art scenario of Assam, political reflexivity seems to be the dominant trait of the art in Assam. Hence activism in relation to art becomes an interesting area of study. Also as mentioned in the foregoing, the overwhelming political consciousness regarding one's ethnicity/identity has become a prominent phenomenon in the last two decades in Assam which find reflections in various modes of cultural expression/art forms (Visual, Literary & Performative) leading art to be upheld as a 'praxis' for the artists. Though mostly visible at the individual level rather than the collective, these independent attempts provide ground for study of the dynamics of identity in relation to art activism. In this context, one can take up various



issues regarding the identitarian politics and activism in relation to the position of an artist as an individual and as a politically reflexive subject devising strategies and tactics of cultural intervention and resistances. One can also look into the aspect of impact of such activism in the social sphere along with the problems and prospects related to the issue). The core issue would be to critically examine the various aspect of identity dealt by the artists such as the exploration of artistic selfhood both in the individual and social levels, or identity as an existential quest of the artist persona within the psycho-philosophical terrain. Though references would be taken from the international and national, the main focus would be on the regional, in our case the visual practices of Assam where one would highlight the art scene of the postcolonial Assam. A general mapping of the scene by tracing the predominant trends would be taken up along with the location of various voices heard on the multifaceted level of identitarian politics such as community, class gender etc. It is worth mentioning herein that Assam is a mosaic of innumerable culture groups. At least one artist from each major community has come out to address the issue of identity within their set historical and existential circumstances, which will be taken into account by taking stock of their geopolitical backdrop and the immediate historical realities along with the other points of references from the broader context related to their existential status. Moreover, here one would also try to explore the prospect and problems of art making in relation to activism associated with the dynamics of identity. It will explore various links between the personal and the social and critically examine the artist's engagement with the political and social in the backdrop of various changes and shifts in the post colonial period of Assam. The major issue in process would be to examine how the artist makes art "Praxis" and the ways s/he fights and formulates in the process. Further, one would also see the impact and effect of activism in the socio-political sphere and make an attempt to examine the possibilities and limitations.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Amelia Jones, The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader New York: Routledge, 2003.