



# EFFECTS OF ASSERTION: TRANSCENDING SOCIAL STEREOTYPES

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## ABSTRACT

The novels *Mereng*, *Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and *Oyonanta* by Anuradha Sarma Pujari Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Arupa Patangia Kalita, respectively, portray women in the twentieth century spanning across pre and post independent India. They present strong female protagonists which were contrary to the ideal expected embodiment of women confined to a domestic environment. At a time, when women's rights were limited and their roles restricted, these women challenged the oppressive norms. Though set in almost the same time period with historical framework in the background, the circumstances that they evolved in are very different. The research will examine feminist themes present in the novels by comparing and contrasting their developments within their social milieu despite the restraints of their time, religion and culture. The research work will use specific examples from the novels, theoretical works of critics and citations from contemporary works to present proposed objectives and demonstrate similar feminist themes of independence, empowerment and honour through each role.

Keywords: *Tradition, discrimination, gender- role. sexual polarization, anti- patriarchy, re-discovery.*

# INTRODUCTION

## 1. Historical Background :

Simone de Beauvoir remarked in her famous work *The Second Sex* (1949) , "... (women) have no past, no history, no religion of their own"(intro xxii) . History is created by those who have the power to write it. And women have been shunned to the margins for quite some time now. In ancient India, women were respected as important members of the community in theory but in practice they were subject to prejudices and mistreatment. The position held by women has been a complicated one. It has seen numerous fluctuations over the ages.

The Indus Valley Civilization, assessed from the excavated artefacts like the dancing women and female figurines suggest a matriarchal society. Female status underwent a decline with the arrival of Aryans. They had developed a patriarchal society in contrast to the former. A slight change came with the early Vedic Age that enabled women to perform rituals independently and receive education. But the degradation of women's condition seems to have occurred around 1000 BCE. The division of labour based on specific gender constructs resulted in segregation of the public and the private. The decline in their agency came as a result of the change in ownership of the plough and property. Men became powerful while in contrast, women were pushed to the margins reducing them to serve as mere beneficiaries. Occasional respites came in the form of reforms like in the 12th century, the Bhakti Movement provided an opportunity for women to contribute to our heritage. It was predominantly focused on improving conditions of the downtrodden. With the practices like polygamy, veiling, matriliney or widow immolation , during the medieval times, their position deteriorated further. Even European philosophers like Rousseau and Aristotle regarded women's position from a similar perspective. They likened modesty and femininity to the female form branding them to be natural for woman.

The final blow came during the Mughal reign. The concept of purdah was emphasized, women were denied positions in socio-religious institutions, polygamy and unilateral right of divorce for men and denial of effective property rights were other factors that denigrated condition of women. But even then, few women belonging to the royal family held influential administrative positions. However , the Hindu regressive attitudes of *Sati* and purdah received popular acceptance during this time which can be alluded to as an attempt at reviving native customs as resistance to a foreign religion which had taken firm root in India by then. The death of the husband was considered to be a great misfortune in the life of a woman. Voluntary immolation by widows stemmed from deeply entrenched beliefs and the dread of discriminatory practices like shaving of the heads or eating bland food and they were not allowed to wear jewelries or brightly coloured clothes among other things. Widowhood was considered to be the result of sins committed by the woman. Despite their skills and abilities women had to remain in the shadows of their male counterparts.

The educated Indians' pursuit for national identity contributed to the forging of the idea of a new Indian who is anti-imperial and modern in outlook. The native intelligentsia's role was instrumental in subverting the regressive customs and they were involved in the re-discovery of India in the contemporary world, the role of women underwent a massive change among other things. With the advent of nationalist consciousness came the reformations that targeted social evils. The first reform movement of the status of women took place at the behest of the middle class in Calcutta during the British Raj. Reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy and M. G. Ranade challenged the purdah system, practices of *Sati* and child marriages. While *Sati* was banned in 1829, widow remarriage was allowed in 1856 and it was only from 1937 that widows were allowed to inherit property. The *Swadeshi*, the *Satyagraha* Movement and those like the Quit India Movement witnessed massive participation of women from all sections of society. Women were previously assigned the position of keepers of moral and spiritual traditions. The nationalists, therefore, regarded them to be crucial to the formation of the new ideal: a "new" Indian woman who was the nucleus of the new family structure which was contrary to traditional and Imperialist norms. According to Geraldine Forbes, the idea of an appropriate space underwent modification and simultaneous expansion with a growing approval for individualism. But there was still a pervading need to abide by what is customary and boundaries were strictly adhered to specially in the case of sexual polarity.

## 2. Synopsis :

Anuradha Sarma Pujari's popular Assamese novel *Mereng* portrays the story of Indira Miri. Born to Sonadhar Senapati, she was encouraged by her father to pursue education seriously. He repeats the maxim, "each one, teach one" and urges her to be an independent woman who can transcend social norms. She goes to Brahma Girls school and later Scottish Church College in Calcutta. There she understands about the brutal socio-religious norms through her already married colleagues. Her resolve strengthens when she learns to acknowledge the resources she had been provided with in an environment that was potentially hostile to the worldly development of a woman. She is married off to Mahichandra Miri who admires his educated wife. But by a turn of faith, she is widowed quite early in life. She stumbles but rises stronger than ever. Indira then sails off to study in Edinburgh University, Scotland and returns home to serve in NEFA, where she finds a home among the native tribes.

The second text, *Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* by Indira Goswami, who wrote under the pseudonym Mamoni Raisom Goswami, deals with the rustic life of Brahmin women whose commitment to the religious institution was important to retain the power that it derived from the legitimacy that was bestowed upon it by people. While Durga sheds her self-respect and leaves for her in-laws, Giribala decides to die rather than leave for a place that obstructs her liberty.

The final text is Arupa Patangia's *Dawn*. It is set in the same time frame as the preceding works. However, the plot revolves around Binapani and her disillusionment with the prevalent milieu. She is that rebel who had to succumb to the norms due to the constraints of her time. Smart and athletic, Bina grows morose with each revelation. She is denied educational rights after attaining puberty, forced to refrain from contacting Ratan whom she liked and ultimately had to marry Chaliha, the person she abhorred, because his family was at par with hers.

The paper hence, observes the different types of restrictions faced by the women despite living in the same time period with the national freedom movement brewing in the background and its consequences being felt by the people in some form or other. It also proves C.T. Mohanty's claim about the misplacement of the Third-World women into a vague, unitary Other by Western concepts of Feminism.

### 3. Research Proposal :

This paper seeks to study the idea of creation of a docile female body and the subversive tendencies of those subjected to these methods employed in the garb of traditions. The influence of a social milieu integral to this process of education, the restrictions that are imposed and the very need to adhere to these are problematized while studying the popular Assamese novels *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, *Dawn and Mereng*.

The proposed work will try to understand the abuse of power by those who are accustomed to inheritance of those and sexual polarity in a social setting that restricts the freedom of a section while facilitating that of the other ; and women characters challenging what is expected of them.

The research is limited in the sense that the focus is on aspirations of female characters as individuals and the fidelity that they exhibit to their own selves. The proposed work is a Feminist study through post-colonial perspective and will abstain from other theoretical approaches while strictly referring to questions raised by the mentioned texts.

#### 4. Objectives :

The paper seeks to address the social setting and the customary beliefs that expected a tailored version of a female body disregarding their instincts and the constant mode of vigilance they were subjected to which led to self erasure. It is an attempt at understanding the defiance of characters who upturn the set notions and pave their own way of life.

#### 5. Research Methodology

The paper presents qualitative research done through analytical reading of the primary texts, *Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker, Dawn and Mereng* and the secondary texts like *A Room of One's Own* and others including journals, critical works , reviews , etc.

### CHAPTER DIVISIONS

The paper has been divided into three chapters : the first, Society and Milieu deals with customs , myths and their subsequent transformation. The second chapter talks about Patriarchy and the subversive tendencies that resulted from reformations by individuals and groups. The last one traces Feminist trends and their manifestations.

#### Chapter I : Society and Milieu

The present institutions in their rudimentary state were so formed that they helped maintain authority over all stakeholders. They have reached the position that they have attained as a result of their preservation by their resilience through adaptation to changing times and human needs that contributes to the general good. But during this process, we need to keep in mind that the might bestowed upon them and resultant attributes exuded by them in order to maintain power is integral to their being. Initially they have basic power but with due passage of time, they begin to exercise legal power and become a part of our day-to-day life. The once hypotheses manifest in forms of solid, immovable structures despite their shallow base

because someone at some point of time presumed them credible. Sometimes, rules proliferated by these institutions surmount previous ones and overwhelmingly establish themselves as customs and later, traditions that must be adhered to to retain a socio-cultural identity. They become difficult to overcome and it becomes a burden on those who seek to question their legitimacy. It becomes a battle against almost universal convictions. The practices hence are grounded in some form of presumptions which were initially adopted and conducted to become preposterous ends in themselves. The social contract was initially formed to protect human beings from themselves but the passage of time makes these structures stronger than they were ever perceived to be. Patriarchal form of administration was considered to be legitimate and which was confirmed to be the most natural form of authority. It sought neither coercion nor force but absolute wilful submission by the Others who agreed to comply with set norms yielding to a Superior. Traditions became integral to this facet --- their morality

pressurized people into believing it their duty to abide, to live how they are "ought to" or told to. This abnegation of Self especially by women, influenced their role in power equations and tools like education and acceptable behaviour led to absolute obedience. For instance, the campaign against elimination of *Sati* succeeded in mobilizing a resistance which claimed cultural legitimacy of the practice.

The orthodox masses considered the adherence to age-old customs as a way to resist colonial intervention, even if they were explicitly regressive. Women were denied agency outside that of the family while motherhood and the role of Household General were marshalled in the fight against colonial oppression. This inner sphere was considered holy and any external intervention was considered unwelcome. And women had to experience a confusing idea of the modern woman. She became an embodiment of both female authority and helplessness. She was taught to be logical, educated but also wary as not to overstep the set boundaries. She was to be a companion to her husband, and to be subservient to the male. When Bela Basu narrates her experiences to Indira she says, "...my education had no value in that house... they sought for an I.A. pass daughter-in-law so that she could interact with the elite sections of society that the famous Basu family belonged to. Her only duty was to take care of the family's reputation, it was disgraceful even to think about going to college or working with strange males."(Pujari, p. 98) The over-educated woman was seen as a threat to the patriarchal set up who would encroach upon the public domain which was considered to chiefly belong to the men. These ancient customs maintain dogmatic doctrine that encourage male supremacy over the female. It declares women unfit for public roles of administration and the like,



requires them to keep to the domestic environment thus containing themselves to the private by becoming submissive and by refuting assertive urges.

The various modes of social organization, divided modes of governance have over the generations made women submit wholly to the men ruling over them. They have had little share in public spaces until the late Modern Age. Her obligations to the male authority was associated with her destiny and such an arrangement was observed to be feasible for the betterment of both. The philosopher Rousseau in *Emile* remarked about the segregation of duties based on gender norms and the Indian sage Manu stated in *Manusmriti* that as a girl, she should obey and seek the protection of her father, as a young woman, her husband, and as a widow, her son; and that a woman should always worship her husband as a God. Now, the adoption of this agenda, when it was propagated initially, might have served adequately in primeval society though it had ceased to exist long back. But in contrast, these institutions have maintained respectable positions in society exuding their discriminatory practices. The once obedience resulting from physical strength became regularized when they assumed legal forms. Hence, what came to be considered right was a result of social necessity that was asserted by the strength of the majority i.e. the patriarchal order. The rudimentary establishments have been preserved throughout the ages and are very difficult to get rid of overtime. The mere hypotheses are strengthened with laws and sentiments which assume the form of customs which people identify with. The legitimacy bestowed upon social institutions becomes a characteristic feature of a group even when they are far from universal. The burden falls on those trying to attack these universal establishments. They are presumed to be opposing the set customs, rebels who try to disturb peace. Naturally, the judgment of the masses go against them unless they succeed in garnering common consent.

Indira Miri in *Mereng* is able to negotiate her way to establish her identity enabled by her integrity, her father being her constant pillar of support who provided her the foundational space for scholarly growth. Benu Kai tells her about the Brahmin child-widow and her mother's gloomy statement addressed to him, "Benu, the women of your community are fortunate to have been born in the lower castes." (*Mereng*, p. 9) This is a direct jab at the archaic rituals that demand women to give up rights over their own lives once the husband dies.

There were several instances where people glorified ancient history and traditions to fight colonial authority. The degenerative traditions were vehemently opposed by the leaders and the ideas trickled down to the masses since they were emotionally involved. The reforms became central to subversion of colonial mechanisms and intrusions from the alien would be rarely encountered if the corrections were carried out voluntarily. While many women belonging to the upper castes and classes justified constraints for women, a significant number of them were actively involved in propagation of female education and liberation. And others belonging to lower castes disillusioned by the inhuman religious differences adopted other religions. Patrick in *Mereng* converted to Christianity because he had witnessed inhuman behaviour from the higher classes. He chose to adopt another religion to be treated better than earlier. And Ratan answers to a similar call, despite losing his familial ties he chose to live freely and be happy.

The concepts of gender and sexuality were national fantasies. Women have often been allegorically compared to nation states. For instance, Mother India or *Bharat Mata* was widely circulated to popularize the concept of national temper. And the family and women's position within it also became synonymous with the idea of Nation thus becoming the domain of anti-colonial activities.

Joan Scott's essay 'Experience' argues that experience is a construct rather than being a given. Similarly, the process of formation of identities is influenced by external factors when we observe them from a critical viewpoint. The consciousness that we develop as a result of action can also be attributed to the dynamic process of personality building. Gayatri Spivak suggests passive representation of the subalterns who were unable to speak for themselves. These re-discovered voices and their reconfigured representation through contemporary perspective helps understand the dynamics of past discussions on issues of the woman question.

## Chapter II : Subversion of Patriarchy

The proper image of a woman in pre-independence India was similar to the Victorian Angel of the House. It was expected of her to be an embodiment of feminine grace. Her sphere was one in which she was in proper control considering it is an extension of the domestic world, charity or religious chores. But there emerged a class of rebels who were neither deviants nor outcasts who were respectable yet didn't conform to their social norms. They were an empowered breed but conducted themselves disorderly within the bounds of their customs: anti-patriarchal and forever questioning. They were pious by decree of social order but



were exclaimed to be controversial within their circles. Despite their immense potential and their resolve to achieve their ambitions, social conditions prohibited them from making their own way in the world by making them shun those for the inevitable life of an intimate female whose duty was to be attentive to every beck and call of the "more important" male members. The smothered life, in case of these deviants, was fueled by their hatred of the society that encouraged a section while keeping another eternally dependent and preoccupied with trifles. Qualities of womanly virtue such as serenity, fidelity, devotion to the family and to her being as a female were socially prescribed as true traits in a woman. The inattention to their ability and castrated power equation shaped their lives, inhibiting their potential to create their own history.

Instead of natural self expression, the female voice mimicked that of the indoctrinated assumptions imposed by male power. The strategy that suppressed the same in their subordinates. . Hence, the departure from a life that upheld womanly duties craving a meaningful life. Some women, unlike most, were recognizable by their high-mindedness and unconventional actions so as to turn over their redundant lifestyle of serving the greater part of society . They broke free from claustrophobic familial ties seeking freedom or sometimes remained faithful to themselves within those constraints. But these developments were shaky from the beginning , women began by accepting lowly positions in a male-dominated hierarchy that strictly admonished their unsexing jobs outside the private sphere. They, being from a self-contained arena, dealt with these sexist expectations which disregarded their integrity. Feminist visionaries rebelled envisioning, erstwhile considered to be a near utopian belief, where gender distinctions would transcend boundaries propelling all into a single egalitarian status ending separate spheres of social performance. Men, on the other hand, set out on the endeavour of modernizing their expectations from women. They persisted in the creation of an educated woman who will be just as devoted to the family as preceding times but could also be presented as a Modern woman who could keep up with the advancements of the age very much bound within the imperatives of female discipline. The twentieth century liberated, Indian wife was required to be an efficient housekeeper, accountant, loyal, all-enduring and a responsible icon of society. She was to be a neo-Indian woman with charismatic domestic virtue, a fantasy of perfection and power.

The conflict of staying alive while repressing the innermost turmoils against the smothering acceptance of society is observed repeatedly in the focal texts. Gilbert and Gubar traced the transformation of the Angel of the house to the mad woman. Their work represented woman in search for identity and authority over her self. Like Charlotte Bronte's Bertha, Ruma in *Dawn* loses her sanity and undergoes terrible punishment. She loved Jatin but had to marry the man her father chose for her. She did not care for his admiration of her or his riches but seethes with frustrations at her confinement within the bounds of a loveless marriage. Her life is destroyed in the name of paternal love. She could be liberated from her life only by being mad. Her vivacious nature is subdued and ends with her being shackled for her manic episodes until she is rescued by Tagar years later. Characters like her are psychologically conditioned to accept the decisions made on their behalf for their good and they, after undergoing thorough indoctrination, are in no state to defy the set social order. Their struggles, which pertain to every(wo)man, prove vain in the face of a much stronger adversary who holds sway over hierarchy, which they assume to be indestructible.

The madness here comes as a genuine expression of the Self, sometimes the only one that she is allowed. It is her existential dilemma to adhere to the norms or "kill the Angel in the House", as Showalter says.

Sonadhar Senapati nurtured liberal views as he educated his daughter at par with men, away from home transcending prevailing social norms. Childbirth which can be perceived as an emphasis on the hindrance posed by patriarchal norms usurps female liberty but not in the case of Mereng. Hers was a companionate marriage and Mahichandra constantly reminds her of going back to teaching since her education remains unutilized. Later in the novel, she goes on to work in the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) which was considered a bold move on her part due to its remote location and hostile geography, something even men dared not to commit to. In the second work, Patangia's *Dawn*, presents the character of Jeuti who is shunned by her society due to her participation in a movie with a strange male. And she shuns it back because she realizes what brings her happiness not what others decide for her. Similarly, when we consider Goswami's novel, we encounter Indranath standing at the intersection of the traditional and the modern. He wants Giribala to receive an education but their fossilized spiritual background inhibits any such flights of imagination. Instead, he arranges for her to assist Mark in his scholarly endeavor. She, being an elite Brahmin widow accompanying a Christian Mlechha, was crucial when it came to subverting the ancient religious beliefs. Soru Gossainee, yet again a widow, uses her superior caste to save a marriage when declares:

"A woman who deliberately destroys the happiness of another man's wife, deserves contempt and I will give her a curse that will destroy her lineage" (Goswami, p. 432)

Giribala in *Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* is married off to the promiscuous Latu Gossain who squandered his life in music, drama and lavish entertainment. For him rituals are just a part of their social identity. He told her "You will have to tolerate some of my... bad habits... but you will have to accept them" (Goswami, p. 140). He adds "I love women...I have done *prayaschit* every time I ate... forbidden things" (Goswami, p. 141). Despite belonging to an excessively orthodox Gossain family, he was unbridled. He felt no obligation to abide by all that was asked of him but she as "his" woman had to bear the brunt of social responsibilities. She was kept in a marriage that asked for her devotion to her husband. The *Manusmriti* states, "Men may be lacking virtue, be sexual perverts, immoral and devoid of any good qualities, and yet women must constantly worship and serve their husbands." Patriarchy pervading the institution of marriage, here, disregards the will of the woman. She responds with the scandalous instance of consuming meat on the auspicious occasion of memorial of their kin. Her mother exclaimed during her childhood that such greed for flesh is inauspicious in a girl and after attaining status of a widow, she committed the heinous act that had never been heard of before. As soon as she returns to her parents, she is surrounded by the stigma that she must have faced at her in law's. Someone from the crowd yells, "Don't touch her,... she's a widow now" (Goswami, p. 27). Mamoni Raisom Goswami writes about the Adhikar as the formal head of the sattras, a person who had spiritual sanctity and social authority along with extensive

feudal lands as property. They have to perform socio-religious functions but are also expected to abstain from certain activities like ploughing, mingling with people of lower castes (mlechhas) or even entering into matrimony with people of unequal status. That is why, Indranath chooses not to marry Elimon and Soru Gossainee checks her attraction towards Mahidhar. These women belonging to higher social status were always subject to discipline and superstitious beliefs. Durga and Gossainee maintain safe distance from Mark sahib's person as well as his shadow because they consider it polluting to come in contact with a Christian. Girls were married off before attaining puberty and in case, someone had the misfortune of attaining menarche before betrothal, the family was alienated from all others in the community and made an outcast in no time.

Females whom we encounter, like Gossainee and Durga serve as an extension of patriarchal notions. They, as agents, imbibe what they had been taught: to observe segregation, to devote their lives wholly to their husbands and family, to be religious in their life, to pass on these traditions and maintain them faithfully. The younger generation like Giribala however, finds it hard to conform to these customs. She has always shown a rebellious streak which flares up even more when she realizes the injustice that she has to face. She was forced to be faithful to someone whom she didn't want. Elimon, though poor, was a Brahmin girl, talked with Indranath openly which was shocking to those like her old companion and is considered a shameless trait in a girl. Indranath is free to roam around till late into the night while the females of the house are not allowed to walk farther than the courtyard. Some like his mother abstained voluntarily while his grandmother never stepped past the *batghar*. Even her desire to visit Puri lay buried within her. Durga wished to go on pilgrimage but her lack of wealth and influence hindered her movements. Her mother-in-law considered her an ill omen. She was suspected of bringing *papagrahas* with her and these superstitious accusations affected her very being which cast a shadow of melancholy over her existence which she abhorred. Her childlessness contributed to these factors even more. Soru Gossainee was a highly respected female who was considered industrious because of her influence on her pupils. She managed to have a hold on some of her wealth through Mahidhar and others but she too was betrayed in the long run.

In Patangia's *Dawn*, the character of Binapani is shown to be inquisitive, someone who has the power to move customs despite her little form. She questions why she needs to bow down to elders and her grandfather, who takes it for granted, is taken aback while her mother weeps at her "wild behaviour". She climbs trees, fishes with bare hands and attempts to ride a horse. She stones the White Sahib when he whips Monglu and this is one of the many scenes that showcase her bravery, her ability to counter what others obey diligently. Darhiya Gossain, she overhears, in an interrogation expresses his displeasure at the anticipated abrupt end to a talented girl's education. She learns the ways of the world and marries Chaliha in spite of all her attempts to avoid any form of relationship with him. She lives more as a powerful administrator of the household rather than a loving wife. She considers it her duty to look after all those who are dependent on her. She shifts from her own room to the one near her mother-in-law to attend to the ailing woman. She brings back Tagar with her but on learning about the latter's abuse at the hands of her husband,

Binapani makes up her mind to leave him. She assumes the maternal position that cares and provides proactively when her own dreams are shattered.

When we consider our third novel *Mereng*, we are presented with a strong female character based on the real life countenance of scholar, educator Indira Miri. With her father's encouragement and support, she was able to lead an atypical life. The times that the novel is set in was parochial in outlook for most women but adequate nurture and trust on her capabilities delivered beautiful consequences. Pujari traverses through the trajectory of her lead character whom she refers to as Mereng, as the title depicts and later as Indira, on attaining maturity. Mereng goes from an insecure child to a motivated leader of the people. Initially, her father and later her husband, both aware of the importance of education and her immense capabilities offer adequate support leading to the culmination in her reaching Edinburgh University in pre-independent India which was unthinkable for most and even more so for a widowed mother of three. She created a niche for herself with the aid of the men in her life. She negotiated her way into establishing her selfhood.

The pre-independence woman in the country tried relentlessly to redefine her identity and space. Colonial influence led to a change in attitude towards women's education in Assam too. The well-to-do progressive families began to take the education of their daughters seriously. But the underlying problems of socio-religious customs persisted. Women like Indira Miri, Rajabala Das, et al. were icons of change. They were educated women activists responsible for initial development of a favourable environment for women's education in Assam. Miri had made significant contributions towards the proliferation of education among the people of North East Frontier Agency as well. Her capabilities as a woman can be perceived as integral to her maneuver of motivating the people to get educated. She became the strong personality that made them acknowledge her as the individual whom they could look upto as a Mother. Indira had a very supportive father but we must also consider the fact that she overcomes the obstacles in her life with ease knowing she had duties to accomplish. Her father only tells her :

"...if you don't build a life of your own you won't be able to live in this society peacefully. Observe the foreign *memshahibs*, how liberated they are. It is education which provides you the ability to be free. "  
(Pujari, p.10, trans. own)

It was, yet again, her father who stood beside his widowed daughter while she set out on her journey of self discovery. She felt responsible towards her children and indebted, thus, constantly upgraded her professional experience trying to achieve what she can. She became the empowered woman emancipated from invisible bounds of traditions. Giribala, however, is not so fortunate. She chose to destroy herself then go back to the family that treats her like vermin. She perceived self-immolation as the only way to freedom. And Binapani, despite having an educated father, had to face unfavourable circumstances since she did not have effective support from her family. While one could venture forth in her quest for self-assertion, the

others succumbed to repressive traditional roles, but with new found consciousness they gained liberation eventually.

### Chapter III : Feminist Reading of the concerned texts

The movement for women's rights and betterment of their condition dates long before the Modern Age. It received new vigour in the 1960s but that was not the genesis of feminism. The old traditions of thought and activities had already diagnosed the ailment of women's inequality in erstwhile societies and had also prescribed solutions in some cases. Early Feminist writers like J. S. Mills and Mary Wollstonecraft had talked about equal rights. In the 20th century, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) portrayed this unequal treatment vividly and sought reformations in the form of access to education, material resources and the time to engage in thought as an alternative to motherhood and marriage.

Societal impositions play a crucial role in developing one's personality. Gender discrimination against a particular group obstructs the growth of their inherent abilities. Virginia Woolf's *Judith Shakespeare* posits a strong argument in this case. She is said to be just as brilliant as her brother but deprived of scholarly knowledge as her gender becomes a hindrance. Her parents keep her busy in ladylike activities and if there is any deviation from the normal, they resort to emotional disciplinary actions. She corrects herself and life goes on. Multitude of women lost their lives to duties assigned to them. These suppressed voices were raging fires within inglorious products of feminine conditioning. However, the feminist produces that we find today are a direct manifestation of the movement of the 1960s which was literary in nature and sought to contradict the images of women portrayed in literary sources. This enabled these activists to combat what was already promulgated and enabled questioning of authority and the influence generated by such institutions. Feminist criticism hence, became one of the most practical ways to modify everyday mannerisms and outlook on life.

Toril Moi explained 'female' as a biological condition, 'feminist' as a political position while 'feminine' is a set of culturally defined characteristics (Barry : 2018, p. 124). This brings us to the aspect of depiction of women in literature which served as the basis of proliferating social conditions, of ideas that were eventually imbibed and became indoctrinated. These characters provided models to be followed by both men and women which shaped their perception of what was acceptable as 'feminine' and what came to be considered as acceptable aspirations for the fair sex. The Utilitarian Victorian society was family-centric that focused on defined gender roles : of the females as the Angel of the house and male members of society as chivalrous gentlemen who were the breadwinners. Those Indian elites educated under the colonial cloak took to mimicking this hidden curriculum which was to be an indigenous construct of the Victorian vision as perceived by modern Indian men. The emphasis was on finding the heroine's choice of partner for marriage which decided her social position and eventually determined her happiness or the lack of these.



The feminist movement of the 1970s put an effort on exposing the patriarchal set-up and mindset behind these which perpetuated inequality based on sexual orientation. Elaine Showalter coined the term 'gynotexts' and detects history in the 1840-80 or the feminine phase when female writers imitated dominant male authors, then a feminist phase from 1880-1920 onwards and the female phase 1920 onwards which tried to include the female experience. The development of gynocriticism and its use needs to be cautious since it deals with :

"the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or the collective female career; and the evolution or laws of a female literary tradition."

The following decade was eclectic in outlook since it drew upon other cultural theories to explore and establish the female experience to make up for those suppressed or lost. The 80s also aimed at formulating a canon of women's writings that encapsulated their re-writings. The phasing of feminist movement is necessary to its progress since it is important to its attainment of theoretical responsibility. Woolf's essay suggested that language use is gendered, so women turning to writing find that they have "no common sentence ready for her use". Our minds are impregnable by social rhetorics of gender conditioning and lack of female education or industry are more prone to fall prey to these constructs. They give in to the constructed performance that is expected of them to carry on. Hence, overarching generalizations are hard to form. Betty Friedan in her work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) pointed out that a woman's "education" is made suitable for her gender and it might not always be preferable by her. The image of what a woman should be is propagated through mediums of the written word and public media. These consequently induce detrimental effects on the psychology of women leading to loss of individual identity. The notion of femininity depends upon social constructs and hence differs from one culture to another. For women, their identity is determined by their biology and Friedan urges them to transcend the female version to find their human identity. Linguistic devices play a crucial role in etching said distinctions and are ever present in the subconscious. Freud talked about female 'penis envy'; the phrase need not be literally considered the male organ itself, rather an emblem of social power and complementary advantages that are available with it. His analysis, Millet's *Sexual Politics* condemns to be the prime source of patriarchal attitude which feminists should condemn. Simone de Beauvoir states "One is not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman". Characters like Durga, Gossainee or even Sita serve as conscious agents of patriarchy without challenging the notion of subjectivity attached to their "being a woman". Female sexuality, hence, is not inherent but formed by social conditioning and constructed based on personal experiences. Discriminatory practices that inhibits female actions amounts to lack of social power which Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar called 'social castration'. The lack of industry based on gender, though, is not a lack of male attributes but refers to the lack of representation. The phallus hence, is not to be considered as biological but as a symbolic representation of power that it endows. When we consider Jasodha or Ruma's mother, we see potential strong personalities who could have been opinionated individuals instead they were conditioned to be the loving maternal figure who thought about their happiness only as a last resort having put the whims of the



male members of their families at the fore. Yet again, martyr Barua had a supportive wife who bore all hardship on his behalf performing the role of the dutiful wife. Hence, the portrayed women characters along with the deviants like Giribala and Mereng are products of culture belonging to the years spanning the nationalist movement, and the years thereafter, were subjected to the same kind of social and ideological restrictions while resisting the same through cultural resources available to them. Due to the lack of fulfillment in a woman and her disinterest, she tries to fulfill through the social role of a mother and housewife attributed to her by society. But it is required of them to achieve self-actualization through meaningful activities that help them feel the exhilaration of achievement. Sexual identity is, therefore, exhibited in the focal texts for this paper as a construction and provides accounts of how this takes place with a continuous resistance to its impact.

## Conclusion

Women from diverse societies, caste or religious beliefs are subject to social exclusions when it comes to education or industry. Once customs and later those equivalent to legal procedures are instrumental in monitoring their day to day life. Their worth was questioned in pre independent India and continues to be done even now. The honourable occupations are decidedly said to be unfit for these Others. And the misery arising out of these prejudices are rarely addressed, the emotions arising out of imposed failures on the womenfolk just because of their biological status amount to great injustice which impacts their psychological standing as well. Their wasted lives create disproportionate development in the world stemming from a restricted arena of acceptable activities that struggle continuously against set norms overtly or covertly. The castrating notions that keeps on nagging at their personal life deprive them of activities that one might want to carry out and happiness that one derives from them which is so easily available to the male sex. Thus, culminating in a degraded and under-appreciated halve of species which undergoes endless discriminatory practices in an uninspired orb of dejection that they are put in.

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