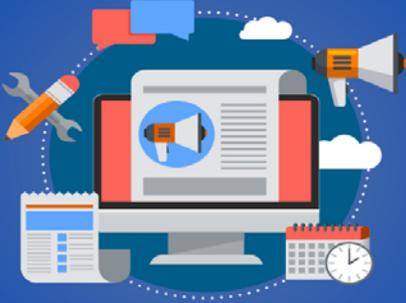


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**The Preferably Unheard: A Feminist approach to Mamoni Raisom
Goswami's *Dantal Hatir Ouinye Khowa Howda* and Nirupama Borgohain's
*Anya Jiwan***

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Abstract:

Fiction is the most powerful form of literary expression today. Apart from entertainment modern novels address subjects of social significance, skilfully draw pictures of reality, complex and fascinating characters and provocative questions and ideas. Contemporary novel represent life in all its complexities. As they emerge out of the factors which make-up a culture, reading novels can provide remarkable insights into culture and people's mindset. The novel in India emerged in the middle of the nineteenth-century. Starting with Lahori 1892, Manumati 1900, *Padum Konwari (Padma Kumari)* 1905 and *Bhanumati* 1908 Assamese novel has made a long journey of more than hundred and twenty years. Feminism was not a familiar term in Assam till the end of nineteenth century. In Assam the feminist thinking was introduced by enlightened people like Hem Chandra Barua and Gunaviram Barua in the nineteen twenties and thirties. The introduction of feminist thinking was largely responsible for the growing awareness among people about the position of women in our society which reflected in the novels *Sadhana in 1928*, by Dandinah Kalita and *Rahdoi Ligiri in 1930*, by Rajanikanta Bordoloi. Feminist thinking continued to reflect through the works of writers like *Chandraprava Saikia, Jyotiprasad Aggarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rabha* till the nineteen fifties. From the nineteen seventies we have writers like Nirupama Borgohain and Mamoni Raisom Goswami taking forward the feminist tradition to a different level with their sensitive portrayal of the true condition of Assamese women in a male-centric society. This study aims to understand the growth and development of feminist attitude in Assam and its image and influence in the minds of the people as reflected in the selected novels within the selected period as well as identify the agents of the dominant culture through which the other half of the population is marginalised. The two novels selected for the study are *Anya Jiwan*, 1987 by

Nirupama Borgohain, and *Dantal Hatir Ouinye Khowa Hawda*, 1988 by Mamoni Raisam Goswami.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Dominant, Repression, Subaltern.

"There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard." Arundhati Roy.

Introduction:

Women's struggle for equal status with men in society began in Europe more than hundred years ago. This awareness termed 'feminism' or 'feminist movement' spread all over the world during the twentieth century. With the entry of western education, the consciousness regarding women's condition in patriarchal societies grew and the need for a similar movement in India was felt towards the end of the nineteenth century. Social reformers Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar had introduced feminist thinking in India. Indian National Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi encouraged women to come out and take part in the activities of freedom struggle. This was the beginning of Feminist movement in India. The attitude towards women has changed to a great extent in Indian society as well as in Assamese society during the course of the last hundred years. But discrimination against women is still a major issue. Our society needs to introspect to locate the root-cause of this major problem in order to get rid of gender disparity. This study aims to understand the gender dynamics in Assamese society as reflected in the two novels selected for the study; *Anya Jiwan*, 1987 by Nirupama Borgohain, and *Dantal Hatir Ouinye Khowa Hawda*, 1988 by Mamoni Raisam Goswami .

Objectives of the Study:

Objectives of this study are: to understand the various layers of subalternity through which the gender dynamics operate in Assamese society and to trace a pattern of feminism pointing out the significant changes in feminist outlook within the selected period. This study also aims to look in to the image of the 'new woman' as visualized by the novelists of the selected novels and to understand the ultimate idea of women's freedom in Assamese society. Feminist theoretical

perspectives will be used to analyse the fictional representations of women to trace the growth of feminist consciousness in Assamese society in the second half of the twentieth century.

Methodology:

Close analysis of the texts will be done from the perspectives of western feminist theories as well as subaltern/postcolonial feminism. The study will be carried out with the help of primary and secondary data. The selected texts and related articles or interviews with the writers will be regarded as primary sources. Feminist theories, criticisms and critical studies of the novels will be regarded as secondary sources.

Nirupama Borgohain's *Anya Jiwan*(1987), is a novel where the feminist approach is consciously and artistically presented. A newly married couple Manuj and Anima goes to visit the village home of Manuj. Before entering the village they cross a river named Tuntuni and Manuj informs Anima that one of his distant aunts, Rambha, had committed suicide by jumping in to this river long back. Later Anima comes to know that this woman Rambha could not tolerate the tortures of her husband and jumped in the river leaving behind her baby girl. Anima meets a very unusual girl named Putali and realizes that she is the baby girl of Rambha. She has been brought up by her maternal uncle and has grown to be a very sensitive, independent and socially conscious girl. She tells Anima that in the beginning due to her painful personal experience she used to dislike all men but after she met Naren, the young school teacher with a progressive outlook and belief in Marxism, her views have changed. She now feels that men are not enemies to women's freedom. On the contrary men and women have to help each other to make women's freedom not a distant dream but a reality. Now Putoli, a follower of Marx's ideology believes that the prevalent socio-economic system is responsible for the 'othering' of women. Only a socialist economic system can provide women the space necessary to fulfil their dream of a free life. Her father's cruel treatment of her mother has given birth to strong anti-men sentiments in her mind. But after being exposed to Naren's liberal ideology, she believes that the solution to women's problems lies in eliminating the gender inequality which is embedded in the patriarchal value-system and is mainly responsible for women's subjection in our society. She tells Anima, "*I have defused the bomb prepared to use against man*" (p, 97). Naren has pointed out to Putoli that from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century Indian men have provided the leadership to all welfare activities for women such as, abolishing *Sati* system, child marriage prohibition,

remarriage of widows and so on. Discussing about Putali Manuj comments that “*Under the influence of Naren only Putali has become a balanced normal girl, not a feminist*” (p, 109). Manuj's above idea of ‘feminism’ is misleading. Yet it reflects the common people's perception regarding ‘feminism’; who believe that ‘*feminist*’ means ‘*anti man*’ or ‘*man haters*’. Putali has been a feminist from the beginning but Naren's influence has changed her attitude from a radical feminist to a socialist one. Putali's character seems to send the message that the true approach to solve women's problems in our society is *socialist feminism*.

Anima's own experience at her in-laws is also not very different. Her aged mother in-law still cooks for everybody with great care and love. But the men of the house including her son the well qualified Manuj, are indifferent towards her comfort or wellbeing. Manuj's father a well-read, cultured, wise man of the village who is looked-up to by the neighbours shows total indifference to the physical and mental wellbeing of his wife. Even in case of his daughters marriages he does not give any importance to either his daughters' or his wife's opinion but considers his own decisions to be the final word. Anima realizes that her mother-in-law's dedication and sacrifices for her family have never been noticed or appreciated by the male members of the family, in other words, the domineering culture. She remains a subaltern who cannot speak or who is deliberately unheard. Anima feels that in that society women are regarded as ‘*the other*’, separate from men or ‘*the self*’. Another character of the novel aunt Bihpuriani, represents the values of the eternal woman of Indian culture. But the treatment she gets from her cruel husband Rajani, for all her sacrifices and efforts to make everyone happy, again indicates the need for a feminist movement in our society. Aikon tells Anima:

“*Actually the point here is, that generation after generation our men have embedded this idea in their marrow that if you are a woman then you have to accept such domineering attitude of man; as if this is the birth right of man*” (p,65).

Through various experiences of women's suffering in patriarchy the need for feminist thinking is highlighted in this novel. Though the novel is focusing on women's problems, yet, the male characters are not portrayed with hatred but with sympathy. Patriarchal society's customs and traditions are regarded as the root cause for the indifferent attitude of men towards women. But man like Rajani who finds sadistic pleasure in torturing woman is not spared but exposed fully with satire.

Dantal Hatir Ouyen khowa Howda (1988), by Mamoni Raisom Goswami is a novel which depicts the decaying Satra culture, the problems arising as a result of child marriage and widowhood and the advent of communist ideology among common people in the nineteen twenties and thirties, a period of transition. The novel centres around young Giribala, the widowed sister of the future Satradhikar of Amranga Satra of South Kamrup, Indranath. Indranath, for his broadmindedness and liberal attitude is the source of inspiration and hope for a better future for the people of the locality. Though Indranath personally believes in the liberal modern outlook yet, he is incapable of resisting the religious conservatism of his family, which thwarts the basic human needs of his young widowed sister Giribala. Indranath's family is at the top of social hierarchy and the center of religion as well as ancient Satra culture and tradition. So Bor-Gosain's family has material riches as well as the respect of the people of the region. But their daughter *Giribala* widowed in her childhood could not tolerate the tortures at the superstitious in-laws place and comes back to her parent's home. But even at her own place she is not spared and suffers inhuman treatment in the name of religion and social custom. As a widow *Giribala* is supposed to wear only white clothes and eat only vegetarian meals without garlic and onion. When her grandfather's shradha ceremony is performed at home she cannot resist her desire for mutton and takes the liberty to taste a little, secretly. But the moment she is spotted on her act, her own mother bitts her black and blue and following the instructions of the priests in the cold winter weather several buckets of cold water are poured on her and she has to stand in that condition shivering, until the priest completes the purification ceremony after her so called sinful act. This repressive attitude of her family and society ignites the inner rebellious self of young Giribala and her actions become more and more loud in defiance till she kills herself.

Unlike men women are expected to remain celibate through the rest of their lives after the demise of their husbands', even young widows like *Giribala* too. Her dead husband Latu Swami was a man of loose character and his memory does not evoke any feelings of love or respect in her mind. While helping Mr. Mark who comes to Amranga to study the old collection of books preserved at the Satra, Giribala is gradually drawn towards Mark and goes to his room with the intention of surrendering herself completely. But Mark shows unusual strength of character and refuses to take advantage of a vulnerable Giribala. The village people comes to know that Giribala is found together with Mark in his room and another very tough and dangerous purification ceremony is suggested for her by the family priest and the people. A shed is made of wood and

dried banana plants and Giribala is asked to stand under it till the priest finish chanting mantras and set the shed into fire. Once the shed is lighted, she is asked to come out immediately, but Giribala refuses to come out and to every one's horror she is burned alive. Giribala's rebellion against the inhuman tortures inflicted upon the upper caste widows by the patriarchal social system takes the form of self-annihilation, the ultimate price to be paid for being a widowed member of an upper caste Hindu family. She has always tried to convey her sufferings to the society through her actions but it has fallen into deaf years till she takes her final step of killing herself in desperation. Ironically the same conservative society allows a man to remarry after the death of his wife but in case of a woman her wishes or needs are never taken into account, her voice is stifled or deliberately silenced with the help of the so-called tradition and custom or religion.

The novel portrays the picture of two more suffering widows; one is Indranath's aunt Durga and the other is Saru Gosani, the widow of Indranath's father's younger brother. Durga's only wish is to give away the remains (asthi) of her dead husband's body into the river Ganga. Her in-laws show no interest in taking her back from her brother's place and in her parent's home also she is an unwanted guest. Her request for money for going to Kashi meets with cruel comments reminding her of her pathetic condition and unwanted presence. Durga almost loses her mental balance when her last hope the gold ornaments are stolen. Later in the name of custom a diseased and broken Durga is send back to her in-laws place. In Durga's case she is not welcomed at her husband's place because they do not want to give her share of her husband's property. Here the power dynamics at play is economical. It is a common practice to deprive widows of their properties either by the in-laws or by the male members of their own families. Durga suffers humiliation every now and then and is forced to lead a life of indignity.

Saru Gosani continues to take care of her husband's affairs alone despite all odds, but sometimes she finds this struggle too much to handle. When Brahmin young man Mahidhar comes to Saru Gosani as a helper she is relieved but her loneliness makes her vulnerable and unconsciously she gets attracted to his manly appearance. Inspecting his sleeping self she is captured by his handsome appearance and thoughts of having a close relationship with Mahidhar tempts her. But she controls her desires and reminds herself of her social standing:

"....Such manly attractiveness is not commonly seen in this area of the Southbank. Taken aback, Gosani stands still for some time.....the thought comes to her mind that Mahidhar's body

looks like the soft soil on the banks of river Jagalia. She feels like touching that soil.....should she go forward?...and forward? And forward?"

Suddenly a bird's harsh cry brings her back to reality and she is full of remorse at her own thoughts: *"This thought is sinful, sinful thought. This thought may drown her (Damudaria Gosani) in Hell. But this thought has anchored into her heart from the moment she has seen Mahidhar babu. As if she is murmuring to herself; forgive me! forgive me Almighty!"*(p,79,80).

But the center of Saru Gosani's world Mahidhar with whom she is dreaming to share her life betrays her and plans to rob her money, before leaving her for good. When he is caught red handed she faints at the shock of the crude reality. Widows are always soft targets for fortune hunters and Saru Gosani has learnt this lesson in the hard way.

The last portion of the novel deals with Indranath's decision to give away the land, occupied by communists, to the tenants who have been cultivating the land for some time. After Giribala's self-sacrifice Indranath realizes that the blind inhuman customs of the society will change only through the demolition of the prevalent economic and political system which patronizes patriarchy. The need of the time is to adopt new forward looking policies which in turn will build a new society in which all human beings will be treated equally. In other words Indranath's self-sacrifice may indirectly be called a desperate attempt against conservatism and towards progressive forwardness. The society of the first two decades of the twentieth century comes to life through Indranath's consciousness. Women are becoming conscious of their subaltern state in this social system but within the dynamics of patriarchy only through the sensitization of the male members about the subjugation of their women their bondage may come to an end. Without help and support from the majority, women's emancipation is not possible and that can be regarded as another reason for choosing a male character as the primary consciousness in the novel.

Conclusion:

Thus, the two novels selected for the study, shows that the consciousness regarding women's subjection is a common feature in every generation. Yet, finding solutions to women's problems is not an easy task at all. Because for generations women have been subjected to socio-economic repressions by patriarchy through the agencies of family, religion, customs and

traditions. The result is such that women have forgotten the fact that they are not only 'females' but 'human beings' as well. Therefore, they have to re-gain their individuality to find their voice and raise it against oppression instead of killing themselves in desperation to make patriarchy hear their deliberately unheard voices like Giribala. Both the novels have emphasized one single point and that is, women's freedom cannot be achieved in isolation. To achieve that target man and woman have to work together and only through the sensitization of men about women's issues the desired outcome can be achieved.

Anya Jiwan has not only portrayed the problems of women but also shown a much bolder action plan towards finding a definite solution of those problems through the educated younger generation Naren and Putali, who advocate for a new society based on mutual respect and understanding. From Rambha's self-sacrifice to her daughter Putali emerging as the strong new woman we see a progressive change in the feminist attitude of the novel. The novel seems to indicate that Marxist-feminism can be the tool to achieve the desired equality among men and women in our society. On the other hand, *Dotal Hatir Ouinye Khowa Howda* portrays a very gloomy picture of the misery of upper caste widows as well as the evils of the tradition of child marriage. Self-annihilation seems to be the ultimate form of protest against the over powering repressive machinery of the patriarchy in the novel. Yet, Giribala's sacrifice has shaken up the foundation of the conservative society and opened up the door for the wind of change to blow away the decaying culture. With the sacrifice of Indranath, the representative of the old culture, a change, a new forward-looking beginning is strongly suggested at the end. We can say that in Giribala we see the trace of the new woman with her uncompromising stand against the silencing agents of the conservative society. Putali reflects the image of the new woman who is strong, determined, forward looking and at the same time has the ability to walk hand in hand with a man like Naren who represents the new generation with his open-minded attitude towards feminist thinking. Her education along with the moral support of Naren have helped Putali to be a strong independent woman in a male-centric society. Similarly in *Dotal Hatir Ouinye Khowa Howda*, through the sensitisation of Indranath to the women's issues the message clearly given is that to free women from their subaltern state men have to change and which in turn will create an open-minded, forward-looking society and only then women's true emancipation is possible.

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