

CHAPTER-III

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3.01. INTRODUCTION

Literature reflects life and life is full of experiences. When it is said that novel is a social document, it is meant that novel reflects the experiences of an individual in his or her effort to cope with the society. In the words of W.H.Hudson,

Whatever aspects of life the novelist may choose to write about, he should write about them with the grasp and thoroughness which can be secured only by familiarity with his material.¹

Mamani Raisom Goswami has carved a niche for herself in the history of Indian fiction by faithfully delineating different issues faced by the down trodden class of the society. Apart from highlighting social evils like violence, orthodoxy, superstitions, the pains and misery of the labourers, the caste and class problem etc., an intense desire to make the women free from the shackles of bondage in a masculine environment runs through her novels. In many of her novels, Mamani Raisom Goswami has effectively projected the ruthlessness of religious orthodoxy in the name of which many women are forced to lead a hellish life. Thus Mamani Raisom shows her expertise in projecting convincingly the agonized mind of the persecuted women.

¹Hudson, William Henry. *An Introduction to the Study of Literature*. 2006,p-133

Commenting on the novels of Mamani Raisom Goswami, Malaya Khaund (1945-) has stated that all her novels are written from her first hand experience of the incidents, situations and characters.²

For a woman who suffered from unknown melancholy during her childhood and contemplated suicide, most of the experiences must have been bitter. That is why, after reading her fiction the readers feel a kind of sadness that lasts for long. Her writings can be read as an expression of brutality of men towards their fellow beings. A humanist par excellence, Mamani Raisom has addressed the problems of the marginalized class of the society with great virtuosity transcending the geographical and political boundaries. However, the novelist always plays a detached role and does not give her weaker characters the authorial voice. Though her characters, at times, protest against the oppression, their protest cannot change or improve the condition. So these characters may be termed as subalterns.

This chapter is an attempt to analyze six of Mamani Raisom's novels from subaltern perspectives. Three of the selected six novels namely *Chenābar Sōt*, *Ahiraṇ* and *Māmare Dharā Tarowāl* deal with the problems of the labourers in construction companies. Two novels namely- *Nilakanthi Braja* and *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā* address the problems faced by upper caste widows in holy places. In *Chinnamastār Mānuhto*, the novelist has addressed the issue of animal sacrifice in Kamakhya Temple. Her concern for women is clearly visible in all these novels.

² See Khaund Malaya, *Indira Goswami : A Critical Study of Her Writings*, 1994,p-1

3.02. *CHENĀBAR SŌT*: THE SILENCE OF THE SUBALTERN

Chenābar Sōt (1972) is the first novel by Mamani Raisom Goswami. Written at the early age of 22, the novel vividly portrays the scenario of the construction work of a bridge over the Chenab river of Kashmir. It deals with the problems in the lives of workers involved in the project. The writer had the opportunity of staying with the labourers for more than six months and her sensitive mind recorded the hard struggle of the labourers for mere survival. At the outset of the novel, the novelist writes,

*‘The Course of Chennab’ is my first novel which was written when I was in Kashmir... I have made a real sketch of the situation as seen by my naked eyes.*³

The novel deals with the lives of workers engaged in the building of a bridge over the river Chennab. Their aspirations and frustrations, happiness and misery, love and hatred, tears and joy find a vivid reflection in the novel. By introducing a new subject in a new setting Ms. Goswami has enlarged the horizon of Assamese novels.

This novel can also be viewed as a work marked by a sympathetic representation of the lives of a group of men and women engaged in building a bridge over the River Chenab in extremely hostile environment. The novelist with vivid realism, deep insight into the situation and her powerful expression makes the novel impressive. Exploitation of the poor labourers by their employers forms the main theme of the novel. Despite their day long hard labour, the labourers cannot manage two square meals. The company management exploits them beyond limits, ignoring the possible threats to their lives. Even if someone dies during work, they are given a pittance in the name of

³Satarawala, kaikos Burjor (comp.), opcit,p-710. Nibha Rani Gogoi translated Mamani Raisom’s novel *Chenābar Sot* into English and an excerpt is included in Satarawala’s book. Quotations from the novel used in the dissertation are taken from this translated version.

compensation. So hard is the struggle for survival, that the poor labourers are deprived of the happiness of conjugal lives.

The novelist develops two main stories- one of Raghamma and her husband Sadashiva and the other one centering round Sonie. During the course of the narrative, several other characters like Bai Saheba, Bazz Saheb, Gauri Shankar, Parvati, Ramveer, etc. make their appearances. This first novel of the novelist bears certain important characteristics of her later novels. With rich imagery and symbols the novelist tells a story that does not have a proper beginning, middle and end.

Sonie was a beautiful young woman. Like other labourer women, she did hard labour to earn her bread. Her husband Gauri Shankar died in a tragic accident and his old father now lived with her. To support herself at her advanced stage of pregnancy and an almost invalid old man, she had come to the bank of Chennab from Kalahaundi to work as a construction worker. The burden of supporting herself and her father-in-law was very taxing for her, especially in an unconducive atmosphere. The opening of the novel gives an impression how the natural beauty of the place is destroyed by the construction work. Buckets, grab, pipe, big plates of concrete, crusher machine, tools etc. have an adverse effect on the natural beauty of the place. Sonie, on her arrival at the work site near Chenab observed all these lying on ground. Even as a girl who was acquainted with all these objects from her childhood, Sonie felt that the tools had destroyed the beauty of the green field and the spots created by them looked like an ugly sore.⁴

Along with the beauty of nature, all these have robbed the labourers of their happiness. Sonie also observed a sizeable number of labourers coming out of the temporary

⁴ See Satarawala, Kaikos Burjor (comp.) Opcit,pp-710-11

dispensary of the construction company with bandages. The labourers frequently got injured while working. But the company authority was not worried about their security. There were several instances where the workers were injured because of the whims of the officials. Resham Singh Khalasi, formerly a menial worker, had been entrusted with the duty of looking after the three dogs of Engineer Waaj's wife Bai Saheba. Sonie saw him limping. She soon discovered that there were many scars of dog-bite on his leg. One scar among those was deep.

As a pregnant woman Sonie would face much more problem. Shanti, a worker, told Sonie that she should have aborted the child and life would be very difficult for her to carry on with the pregnancy. Spivak has opined that child birth is a kind of unpaid labour for the women folk. Though the patriarchy takes it for granted, the whole process of birth demands a lot from women and in case of most labourer women the process repeats year after year.⁵ Mamani Raisom Goswami has vividly described the process in the novel. When Sadashiva noticed his wife Raghama, he felt for her. She had been regularly conceiving his child since their marriage. Her weak body stood in sharp contrast to her swelling abdomen. Her limbs were dry and hard. Still she had to work very hard both at home and work site for the survival of the family.

Godball, the company Engineer, promoted Sadashiva to the post of night chowkidar at the Engineer's quarters and mess from his work at the site. While Sadashiva was very happy at this elevation, his wife Raghama was furious because she knew his nature. He had a weakness for women and his new assignment would keep him away from her

⁵See Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty's *A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: Mahasweta Devi's Standayini* in *Subaltern Studies V*, p-104

for longer time and would also provide him the chance to be with other beautiful women, especially the wives of the officers.

She felt insecure as Sadashiva would be in constant company of the wives of the officers whom he would escort through the rough terrain of Chennab. Sadashiva convinced her that the new assignment would ensure a better life for his family. His friends considered him lucky. Raghu, a worker, compared him with Lord Shiva. Initially Sadashiva enjoyed the new job and the importance attached to it. Mandal, a character from the novel, explained the importance of the job to Sadashiva and said that the constant company of the powerful class would make him powerful and he should use the opportunity to square accounts with his enemies.

But slowly Sadashiva started missing his community. At the parties of the officers he had enough to drink and eat, but he was a dejected soul. In one such party, when an old Oriya labourer was tortured by Baaz Saheb, Sadashiva was very angry with the officer. For the first time, he tried to protest against their atrocities. He stood near the group that was enjoying the happenings. But before he could do anything, he became the victim of the whims of the sahebs and their guests. For their fun, he was forced to drink and run to and fro through the hanging bridge several times without halt. As he started losing balance, Ragamma appeared in the scene. Like a tigress she tried to protect her husband. She requested everyone present there to save him. When no one dared to come forward, she called them '*eunuch*'. Finally, Sadashiva saved himself. Through this incident, Ragamma's love for her husband and her sense of duty as a wife come to light. She had never dared to protest against the high handedness of the company officials. But when her husband was targeted, she broke all restraints and shouted at everybody present there. But no one came to help her and that had been the

characteristic of the working class. They never rose in unison to protest against the exploitation they were subjected to and that is why they were subalterns. When Sadashiva tried to protest against the ill treatment of the old labourer by the officers and their guests, he was made a victim.

A few days after the incident, Sadashiva died of a fatal wound when splinter of a stone after a dynamite blast entered his stomach while he was sleeping at home. The company, while blasting, never took precautionary measures. On this occasion, they did not even blow the whistle to alert people. Such accident occurred earlier also, but the careless attitude of the company towards the poor labourers did not change. In the name of compensation, the victims were given a pittance. The novelist very effectively used the image of the '*fota juta*' (torn shoes) at this point to narrate the condition of the poor labourers. The labourers were exploited by the company owners to the extreme limit and when injured, they were thrown away like torn shoes, without any effort to repair them.

While the womenfolk were busy inside consoling inconsolable Ragamma, there emerged the hero of the novel- Shivanna, the first husband of Sonie. There had been several references to him earlier also and he made his physical appearance too. But now for the first time he appeared as a leader of the labourers. With the death of Sadashiva, the focus of the story shifted to Sonie and Shivanna. When he demanded that Sadashiva's family must get due compensation, everyone present there supported him. But when the officers arrived at the scene, things changed. Wazz sahib, accompanied by a host of other officers came and as mark of respect offered flower to the dead body. There prevailed absolute silence for quite sometimes. But when the officers were about to leave, Shivanna broke the silence. With an assertive voice, he asked the officers to

stop and demanded a logical compensation from the company. For the first time in the history of the company, a labourer had dared to demand something. As a consequence of this demand the higher officials attended the funeral of Sadashiva till the very last.

Thus Shivanna, the leader, stood apart from other characters in the novel. He dared to raise his voice against the dominant company officials to cause a change. This change in the approach of the officials towards the death of labourer was possible because Shivanna's voice reached the dialogic level of utterance.

Sonie was married to Shivanna when she was only eleven years old. But during the famine of Kalahaundi, Shivanna ran away and could not be traced for several years. He met Sonie after a long gap at the work site near Chennab as Gauri Shankar's widow. Sonie was full of hatred for him as he dejected her earlier. But living with her father-in-law was a challenge in itself. Women suspected her of having physical relation with the old man. Parvati once asked her to swear by Vaishno Devi to prove that she did not have a physical relationship with her father-in-law, old Ramveer. Sadashiva, Raghamma and others found it hard to believe that Sonie was living with the old man as a daughter-in-law. Moreover, she knew that soon she would need a solid support during and after the birth of her child. But escapist Shivanna was obviously not her man and she referred to him as *that rogue*. So, on their first meeting after his arrival at the work site, she did not welcome him. But when he demanded compensation for Sadashiva's family, she was convinced that Shivanna was no more an escapist, rather, he might be a trustworthy companion. She had been told that he had never been in relation with any women during all these years. However, a section suspected him of having a relationship with Wazz saheb's Bai Saheba.

Sonie was a beautiful lady having many admirers. She was known as 'sultana' in the graph camp at Talowara. Her friend Parvati frequently visited the camp. She told people that her brother worked there. But it was an open secret in the work site that this relationship was not what she wanted people to believe. All her demands for new sarees or kumkum were fulfilled by that brother. In a sudden whim, Sonie decided to visit the graph camp with Parvati. After her return from the camp, she felt like a sinner as she saw Shivanna waiting for her. She wanted to take a bath to purify herself before touching him. However, Shivanna told her that she was as pure as *Maa Vaishno Devi*, despite knowing well that she had sold her body in the graph camp. The novel ends with Sonie and Shivanna preparing to leave the place along with old Ramveer and Shivanna promising that he would not allow the baby to be born to be used by the company owners as torn shoes. He also realized that his moral strength had helped him survive all the hardships of life.

Several facets of Sonie's character make her different from others. She was bold and compassionate. Her decision to give birth to her child amidst all adversaries was a bold step. She never neglected old Ramveer and looked after him despite all hardships. Like a compassionate mother she fed Raghamma's children. Her decision to go to graph was another bold step. She had done that to take revenge on Shivanna whom she suspected to be in a relationship with Bai Saheba. When she realized her mistake, she repented for it. Thus she was a contrast to Raghamma for whom husband was everything. Sonie also loved her husband. The memory of her dead husband Gauri Shankar tormented her. But she realized that like the course of Chennab, life must move on and it was important to adjust oneself with the course of life.

Sonie had her self-respect. When Sadashiva gave her the indecent proposal of accompanying him to Dharmasala, she slapped him. However, she had always been kind to his children. Even though she had been ill treated by women including Raghamma on several occasions, Sonie had been kind to all of them in time of need and thus she succeeded in forming a 'strategic essentialism' which can be defined as a temporary essential group and an identity used in the praxis of discourse among people.

Moreover, the novelist has portrayed Sonie's character as a potent rebel. She was well aware of the exploitation of her class by the company owners. At times, when the daily labour became unbearable, a stubborn feeling came to her. On occasions, she even thought of disobeying her superiors. However, such thoughts were momentary. Again she felt an attraction for Shivanna when she heard him demanding compensation for Sadashiva's family. The information that there would soon be a union for the labourers gave her pleasure.

The novelist has very poignantly described the condition of the poor labourers. Raghamma's children were always half starved. They always fought amongst themselves for food. Once when they snatched away a piece of roti from Raghamma's mouth, she became angry and bursted out at him asking him to eat her instead of *roti*

Fight for the leftover food thrown away from the officers' mess was usual scene and Raghamma's son Chatto was always there. He always went near the pipe of the officer's langar in the morning to eat starch of rice that came through the pipe. The children of the labourers fought amongst themselves in order to eat the remnant of food collected in tins. Often they get injured in the process. Sometimes when the Bai Saheba threw sweetmeats in their midst Beating and kicking were fierce.

Despite the promotion of Sadashiva, his family continued to starve. He once tried to steal a fish to feed his family. Ragahmma could never buy meat of the goats slaughtered at *khalashi langar*. That was the condition in almost all the families. In unhygienic surroundings, devoid of all the basic amenities of life like –health, education, proper shelter, food etc. the labourers struggled for survival. However, the labourers had learnt to live amidst such hardships taking everything as part of their survival.

The labourers fought amongst themselves over petty matters, but they shared a sense of community feeling. Sadashiva preferred the company of his people to the wives of officers. When he was not granted leave to attend *Duushera* festival with other labourers, he was annoyed. Later, in an intimate moment with Bai Saheba, he preferred stealing her ornaments to enjoying her body, despite his weakness for women. But later he went to Sonie seeking her body. When rejected, he was angry. Though Bai Saheba was beautiful and had the sophisticated beauty, something could not be expected of labour women like Sonie, then also Sadashiva craved for Sonie as she belonged to his community. Bai Saheba offered her body to Shivanna also. He was more interested in Sonie, despite knowing that she had slept with someone at the graph camp. The character of Tara Singh, the expert *khalasi* cook, shows how strong the community feeling was. The Boss of the company wanted to appoint him as the cook of the guest house in Delhi. But Tara Singh did not agree because he believed that there might be satisfaction to the tongue and stomach in company's kitchen in Delhi, but it could not provide one with the mental satisfaction which was there in the *khalasi* kitchen.

The labourers came from different parts of the country like Hyderabad, Rajasthan, Orissa etc. but under the hegemony of the owners, they became one class and abject poverty had been their common feature. The illiterate labourers were oppressed by

different agencies. On one hand, they were exploited by the owners of the company who were the dominant local leaders in the national level mentioned by Ranajit Guha. On the other hand they were oppressed by the religious discourses. The labourers worshipped gods and goddesses like *Vaishno Devi, Bana Durga* etc. and offered coconut, *kheer* and other dishes that were luxury to them, for the appeasement of the gods. Once before the construction of a pier, the labourers offered a *soft black kid* to the Goddess because few labourers saw the impression of the anklet worn by the Goddess at the spot where the pier was to be erected.

Despite being victims of superstitions, the labourers understood the basic truth that there was no difference of religion at the feet of the Goddess. They also had the courage to question '*who is that sinner who says that the untouchable and low castes have no rights over the temple?*'⁶

If a sense of belongingness had been the strength of the labourers, Bai Saheba was a subaltern due to lack of this sense. Bai Saheba was the wife of officer Wazz and had been used by the novelist as a contrast to Sonie and Raghama. With her sophisticated beauty she was a continuous threat to them as their husbands were her subordinates and might be snatched away by her. Her soft and beautiful feet, at times, appeared as a poisonous cobra in Sonie's dream. The novelist narrates,

*Still Bai Saheba is like a mystery which cannot be deciphered. As if the enigma of several centuries is intertwined with the various facets of this character.*⁷

For Sonie and Raghama, Bai Saheba was the epitome of beauty and her life was the ultimate one a labourer woman could dream of. But Bai Saheba was also like 'torn

⁶Satarawala, Kaikos Burjor (comp.)opcit,p-746

⁷ Satarawala, Kaikos Burjor (comp)opcit,p-749

shoes'. She was dejected and always felt lonely. She came to live with her husband in the work site far away from her family, friends and society. But her husband Waaz did not have time for her. Even in parties, he was seen with other women. Because of the indifferent attitude of her husband towards her, she offered her body to different men to fulfill her physical desire. She told Shivanna about her relationship with one commander from Akhnoor with whom she had visited several places. That commander loved her, unlike her other admirers who were always after her body. She even offered her body to Sadashiva who preferred to steal her ornaments rather than having physical relation with her. Stooping below her status to establish a physical relationship with a poor labourer, was a humiliation itself and then to be rejected by someone who was far below her position questioned her very womanhood.

By exposing her beautiful body to Shivanna on the bank of Chennab, she gave him an invitation. Shivanna respected Bai Saheba very much because he was promoted on her recommendation. But he was always her obedient servant, not her lover. Thus all her efforts to belong to someone failed and she became a subaltern.

Parvati, who had the ill fame of selling her body, told Sonie that Bai Saheba never loved anyone. While Parvati sold her body for a better living, Bai Saheba gave her body to other men to quench her bodily desire and for Parvati that was a sin. Parvati was a perfect gendered subaltern in the novel. She prepared delicious dishes for her husband Sachdeo on festivals and always took very good care of his clothes and belongings which were expected of a married woman. But her husband was the man who initiated her into prostitution. Once, in a game of card when he lost all his money, he offered his wife Parvati as his bet which he eventually lost. As a result she had to sleep with a Punjabi from the graph for a night who tortured her leaving scar marks of teeth and nail

all over her body. That man had even bitten off a part of her breast. She had to spend several days in the company's hospital.

Despite this humiliation, Parvati followed the diktat of the society and wore vermilion in the name of her husband. Unlike Raghamma, Sonie and most of the labourer women, she did not have a family to belong to. When Sonie mentioned about her father, Parvati revealed her past. She did not know who her father was. There were rumours about her mother's relationship with several men.

Living such a life it was only natural for her to believe that men were not loyal. Parvati, throughout the novel, hardly lost her composure and always wore a carefree attitude regarding the kind of immoral life she led. She maintained herself well to attract her customers. But inwardly, she craved for a normal life. Even though she had more reasons to rebel than any other character in the novel, she never protested. Her oppression is three folded- as a labourer, as a wife and as a prostitute.

The oppression of the labourers as a class had been shown on different occasions in the novel. The narrative had shown how the labourers were deprived of the benefits of political independence. Before independence, a group of British soldiers used to visit Kalahaundi riding horses. Poor people were terrified by their atrocities. A group of native came and assured the poor people that their hardship would be over as soon as the British were driven out. The Britishers stopped coming. The Indian political leaders started coming and the people started worshipping them. But nothing had changed for the poor people of kalahaundi. Thus Indian independence produced a powerful class (the political leaders) and the commoners were kept out of the benefits of political independence.

Moreover, on several occasions parallels were drawn between the political leaders and the company owners- both exploited the poor working class. If the political leaders and company owners were the dominant group at the national level, the company officials were the dominant group at the local level.

The novelist has very effectively used the image of the torn shoes (*fota juta*) in the novel. Over the years, Sonie had observed that the labourers were used as torn shoes by the company management. Once their purpose was served, they were thrown away just like a pair of torn shoes. When Sonie conceived, she promised to herself that she would not allow her baby to be used as torn shoes by the company owners.

3.03. AHIRAN: THE MEEK VOICE OF PROTEST

The novel *Ahiran* (1980) again deals with the problem of the poor labourers engaged in construction work of an aqueduct in the river *Ahiran* in Chattisgarh. Mamani Raisom's sympathy for the oppressed and marginalized section of the society finds expression in the novel. With her first hand experience of the situation, she has very authentically narrated the whole story. However, it deals with a more complex psychological and emotional problem. Vishnu Prabhakar writes,

*While Indira Goswami was living in Madhya Pradesh a bridge was being constructed over the Ahiran River which event she had observed from close quarters and has been incorporated in her novel, Ahiran.*⁸ Her first hand experiences form the basis of this novel. There are constant conflict and struggle led by various characters such as the loyal Harshul Saheb, Nirmala and Ajjij Miyan.

⁸New World Literature Series:12,*Selected Works of Indira Goswami*, 1988, pp-vii-viii. The Foreword originally written in Hindi by Vishnu Prabhakar has been translated into English by Jai Rattan

Nirmala and Harsul together give the story a psychological edge. As the story unfolds, readers learn that Nirmala was a brave and educated girl with a carefree attitude towards life. She was engaged to a physician. With her college friends she also indulged in several activities and served the poor and needy. One intoxicated friend of her who also was her silent lover one day forcefully stripped her semi naked in market place and this single incident ruined her life. A rape victim is always treated differently and often isolated in society. She does not get offer for marriage. Nirmala was lucky to find match in elderly Mr. Pandey, an engineer in Harsul's company. However, this match also turned out to be a compromise. Mr. Pandey suffered from Tuberculosis and thus he himself was an isolated figure. This elderly person was kind hearted, but was not surely the man of Nirmala's dream. She came to the work site leaving behind her family, relatives and friends to start life with him. But Pandey failed her miserably. He was totally indifferent to her mental and physical needs. So she started the venture of teaching the children of the poor labourers in the work site. Her husband even encouraged her to learn driving from Harsul. Thus a fresh chapter started in her life. Apart from teaching her driving, Harsul had been a constant source of support for her. In Harsul, Nirmala found a friend to whom she could confide her desires. Mr. Pandey died of T.B. and Nirmala went back from the work site for two years. This separation made Harshul realize that he was attracted towards her. They were in constant touch through letters. Harsul even visited her once.

After initial hasitation Nirmala ultimately accepted Harsul's proposal for marriage. Once again she came to the work site. Like her first husband, Harsul also failed to fulfill her bodily desire. At the age of forty five, he realized that he was impotent and like a true escapist, he tactfully brought Mahesh Thakur, a young engineer, to give Nirmala

company. A repetition of happenings can be seen here reminding readers of Harsul's entry into Nirmala's life due to indifference of her husband Mr. Pandey. Only difference was- Harsul was a caring husband. Knowing well that he would not be able to give her child, he created an atmosphere for Nirmala to develop an intimacy with Mahesh Thakur. Constant companionship attracted these two towards one another and this feeling was accentuated by the indirect encouragement of impotent Harsul. Nirmala was tormented by Harsul's indifference towards her and she told Mahesh,

*He tries to cheer me up if I seem dejected-but what an attempt! After a lifetime of humiliation, pain and frustration, I thought that I had reached harbor, now I will cling on to life. I will rid myself of the loneliness that had wrapped itself around my being but, I don't know what happened! Am I not a failure?*⁹

Mahesh Thakur expressed his concern for her. His soothing words certainly encouraged depressed Nirmala. Mahesh realized that Nirmala was the best source available in the camp site to break the monotony. Secluded from his society, he found in this elderly woman with ill reputation a perfect companion. For Mahesh, Nirmala was always pure (Nirmal). He advised her to be another Isadora Duncan and to transcend all the conventions of society to bear the child of the person she loved.

Initially, Nirmala restrained herself from breaking the society code by developing an extra marital affair. But eventually her urge to test her fertility got the better of her restraint and accepted his seed. She ventured out on trips with her young admirer. On one such trip through Hasadeo River during heavy rain, their boat was washed away by

⁹*Selected Works of Indira Goswami (Mamani Raisom Goswami)*,1988, p-196. The original Assamese novel *Ahira* has been translated into English by Pradipta Borgohain under the same title and included in New World Literature Series:12 All the lines from the novel used in this dissertation are taken from this translated version.

the strong current when the barrage-gate had been opened. Police rescued the couple miles away.

Nirmala conceived and thus she proved to herself her womanhood. But at the same time, she developed a strong sense of guilt. She felt like a whore, because even though she considered herself a woman liberated from the discourses of the society, she had in fact internalized the discourses. She failed to realize her dream of becoming a mother.

Nirmala failed to be Isadora Duncan. She finally aborted herself by thrashing her belly.

D.K. Baruah holds the opinion,

*Nirmala conceived but her dream of founding a new life in freedom could not be sustained. She could not be an Isadora Duncan who talked of freedom of woman; of woman's right to have children from any person she liked. The choric voice of traditional opinion ruined her psyche. She aborted herself thumping on her bulging abdomen.*¹⁰

Nirmala looked like an independent lady in the novel. But, in reality she was a gendered subaltern. Her engagement with the physician was broken because she was raped by a drunkard. The physician, being a male, had the right to walk out of the engagement. The drunkard was one of Nirmala's college friends and her silent admirer. His attempt of rape on her was his revenge because Nirmala was engaged to the physician. The rowdy young fellow admired her beauty and found himself no match to propose her for marriage. Jealousy combined with a sense of inferiority led him take the decision to tarnish Nirmala's image in the public. He made her semi nude in the market place in presence of a crowd.

¹⁰Satarawala, kaikos Burjor (comp.), opcit ,p- 23

Thus it can be seen that Nirmala had been a victim of discourse created by the society. It is the man who dominates and dictates term with woman. A girl's reputation can be destroyed by any man; it does not matter if he is a known profligate.

Moreover, Nirmala's words, *We had no brothers. There was I and my four step-sisters. I did the marketing myself*¹¹ has several implications. First, it reveals how society prioritize boy over girl. It also hints at the gender defined role. Because Nirmala goes for marketing, a role not assigned to girl by the discourse of the society, she is prone to attacks and molestations. Nirmala was molested in the crowded market. But no one came to her rescue and readers are not told what legal action was taken against the rowdy boy. The guilty person is often forgotten when he is a man and society focuses on the victim woman. When the drunkard was creating all sorts of nuisance in the market the shopkeepers and others were enjoying the spectacle from a distance. Years later, it was Nirmala, the woman, who had to give clarification regarding that incident to Harsul, because she felt suffocated by the various rumours regarding this incident and also her character that went round the company.

Again in her relationship with Mahesh Thakur, the choric voice of the labourers and officials blamed her. Thakur had been transferred to a far off place to start life afresh amidst new people. But Nirmala had to face the brunt. As Harsul's wife, she obviously enjoyed a status in the company. But on her wedding party given by Harsul in the company site again she was ill treated by a drunken officer. He made an indecent proposal to Nirmala and seeked her permission to touch her beautiful legs. Her decision of second marriage earned her a bad reputation.

¹¹*Selected Works of Indira Goswami (Mamani Raisom Goswami), Opcit,p-143*

While the drunkard continued to be in the party, it was Nirmala who was sent off by her protectors- Harsul, her husband and Mahesh Thakur, her new admirer. Nirmala was well aware of her subjugation by different agencies. Despite that she tried to assert her individuality without suppressing her desires. She said that love was the essence of her life and love for her was not merely physical.

Nirmala had been a victim of a very powerful discourse even in her urge to conceive and in the self induced abortion. Social discourse has made motherhood an essential phase in the life cycle of a woman. Nirmala wanted to be a mother, but her two husbands were impotent. This strong desire to conceive had compelled her to momentarily transgress the boundaries drawn by different discourses. In a strong urge to make herself a complete woman, she conceived from her relationship with Mahesh Thakur. But when a sense of guilt was infused into her by the powerful choric voice, she destroyed the fetus.

In an apparent look Nirmala might appear like a rebel. But she was not happy the way her life had turned. She told Harsul, to think of her as a fallen woman. She always wanted to lead a normal contended life. Kadam, a minor character in the novel, is a perfect foil to Nirmala. She had a relationship with a driver Gaurishankar. When she became pregnant he left her with a promise to comeback, which was never kept. However, she still wore the vermilion as his wife. In the beginning, she had a hope that Gaurishankar would come back. As time passed by, the hope died out. But she still gave birth to the child. The novel ends with her baby in Harsul's arm and she weeping loudly.

There are other women characters in the novel like Nani, Shoni Bai etc. All these women were used by different male characters as sex object. Nani was involved in a sexual orgy with Junior Engineer Jibaram Das, time keeper Durjyodhan Thakur and others. Shoni also sold her body. Many other women characters were forced into prostitution by the situation for mere survival. On one hand, the company owners and officials exploited the poor labourers, and on the other hand there is hostile Nature. The novelist narrates,

*Everywhere it seemed a withering wind had sprung up. The water of the Shivanath river had dried up.. That day in the mohua shop, the dumper driver had said that famine was imminent in Polari and Bofra villages. Earlier they had earned a few rupees by selling this leverage. That was put paid to by the nationalization of forests.*¹²

The locales lived in the forest for years and forest was their livelihood. But with the nationalization of forest these people were robbed of their livelihood. Again in the name of development, many were displaced from their home. The entire area was so barren that they could not even cultivate the land. Ajjij Miyan who frequented the nook and corner of the entire area, narrated how families had allowed their daughters to indulge in flesh trade for mere survival. Hunger had been the greatest problems for the poor families. Most of the families had four to five ripe young girls and each of them had four to five bastard children. With all the avenues closed, the families were left with only one option for livelihood-prostitution.

Most of the women suffered from sexual diseases like syphilis. For Nani Bai, who used to run a brothel, the girls were her source of income, for young company officers the

¹²Selected Works of Indira Goswami, opcit,p-144

girls broke the horrible monotony of their camp life, for contractors like Ujagar Singh the girls were medium to please higher officials to get contracts. Different agencies used the girls as commodities. However, for these girls, prostitution was their food and the path for survival. Ajij Miyan's observations add a new dimension to this issue of prostitution. Miyan was not happy with the forest department doctor, who declared that many of the girls had syphilis. Miyan felt that the doctor had in a way pushed the families to death by destroying their livelihood. He believed that as no one could provide them with alternative source of income, those people should at least be allowed to die natural death.

Thus the women characters in the novel fall into the category of gendered subaltern as defined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. While the subaltern is the section that remained disempowered even after political independence, gendered subaltern is a class that is created by the over dominance of patriarchy. Thus gendered subalterns are doubly oppressed.¹³

Harsul and Ajij Miyan are two main male characters in the novel. Other male characters like Jibaram, Duryodhan, Mahesh, Gaurishankar, Das Munshi, Pandey etc. are used either as foil to the two main characters or to support the story line that move around the protagonists. By describing their physical features, the novelist draws a sharp contrast between Harsul and Jibaram Das. While Das was a lively, cheerful young man, Harsul was a sombre aged person, more inclined to contemplation than conversation.

¹³ See Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *Can The Subaltern Speak?* in Bill Ashcroft's (ed) *The Post Colonial Studies Reader*, 2003, p-28

Harsul had served the company for long twenty years with utmost dedication and sincerity. But he had been exploited by the company. He sometimes contemplated what he had got from the company in return of twenty years of selfless service. By his experience and expertise he deserved the position of Deputy General Manager in the company. But his juniors and less efficient persons had been promoted ahead of him. However, he was not deterred by such things. From his mentor, Mr. Das Munshi he had learnt to consider work as his religion and to work against all adversities. Das Munshi once advised him to learn to wend his way through thorns to understand life and that had been his guiding principle.

Harsul was brought up by his uncle. After joining service, he deposited money to build a house, but ended up spending the money for the education of his cousins. He did not regret that and felt that he was a traveler and a permanent home was not needed by him. But at times he longed for a home and family of his own.

While other characters, especially the officers, consider the camp site a prison, Harsul and Ajij Miyan felt at home. Both of them were trustworthy. With a philosophical bent of mind, they selflessly helped others. Harsul was like a guardian to the poor labourers and Miyan was their friend. Unlike other officers, Harsul mixed up with all section of people, cutting across the barrier of class and caste. Harsul was respected by all for his honesty and simplicity. However, he too faced hardship and insult during his service. He told Nirmala that he too had been pelted by the stones of the agitating labourers and the union. On one occasion at Ramsu branch in Kashmir, labourers wanted to deck him with a garland of shoes. After long experiences, he was used to such insults.

The demands of job, sufferings of the poor, hypocrisy of the powerful-all these made Harsul a stoic. Duryodhan Thakur discussed holy *Gita* and literary works of Munshi Premchand with Harsul. Jibaram once created a hue and cry as he saw head cook Mansa holding Nani's hand. When Harsul saw these two involved in a sexual orgy with poor and helpless Nani, he was shocked. But he did not react. By not asserting his power, he became a subaltern. At times, the company even insulted him by appointing his juniors as his superior. Moreover, there was the government official to make life difficult for company engineers like him.

Jibaram, the engineer, could act like a morale police because his position had given him power over the poor labourers. Mansa and Nani knew one another from their childhood. For him, Mansa's act was not morally upright because Mansa had done that in a respectable place-officer's living. Thus Jibaram asserted power over his subordinates and at the same time created the myth that he was morally upright. When he was found in a compromising situation with Nani, his hypocrisy was exposed along with that of Duryodhan, but he was not answerable to anyone.

Harsul was worried a bit after the death of Das Munshi who died all alone. Harsul had heard that the final days of Das Munshi were pitiable. His body remained unclaimed for two days in a hotel room. When no one from his family turned up to claim the corpse, some one from the company took charge of the body and performed the last rites. In loneliness Harsul often drew parallel between his life and that of Das Munshi. A strong desire grew in him to avoid a death like Das Munshi.

Despite having a cordial relationship with most of the people, Harsul felt quite lonely at times. He also wanted to belong to someone. After pondering for some days, he

ultimately decided to marry Nirmala. When he proposed her, Nirmala accepted her proposal in an unusual way. She told Harsul that by proposing to marry her he was not doing a favour to her as at this age he would not find a match like her. She even went to the extent of declaring that during a period of few months prior to Harsul's proposal, she had physical relationship with two other men. She also declared that despite knowing all these, Harsul would have to accept her as his wife.

Harsul, though, was respected and trusted by many, did not belong to any one. If Harsul failed Nirmala as a husband, Nirmala too had taken Harsul for granted. Ajij Miyan resembled Harsul in several ways. Both were homeless, Miyan's condition being worse. He was an illegal migrant to India, which once was his own country. Miyan's character also brought the issue of partition and the resultant violence. He never respected the political boundary between India and Pakistan and firmly believed that one could not separate a country in a sudden whim. Though they were wide apart from one another in education and status, with Miyan only he discussed about his marriage. For Miyan, Harsul was the person who could be trusted to build a *makbara* for his dead mother. He deposited money with him for that purpose. The narrative makes it clear that Ajij Miyan was in India only to build the *makbara* according to the last wish of his mother, even risking his life.

But neither Miyan nor Harsul could belong to one another completely. As an engineer, Harsul had a community he could belong to- that of the engineers and other company officers. But he was never close to this community. Once Ujagar Singh said to him,

Sahib, you are a new man here. I hear that you don't know how to enjoy life. Sidiq Sahib, Dalmia Sahib and a dozen of other Sahibs from the company want to return to

the company, although they left company to work in the government. Here they spent their days like Clive Sahib.¹⁴

The other Sahibs mentioned by Ujagar surely enjoyed camp life and accepted everything offered by the wicked contractors. Harsul was unlike them. He rejected monetary offer and the girl provided by Ujagar. Thus he was a misfit in the company. Most of the engineers like Dharma Dixit accepted the offers that were unfair to Harsul. They had a different approach to adjust to camp life. Isolated from society and more importantly from families, they drank, gossiped and had sex with poor girls. Nirmala was always a hot topic of discussion for the young officers and such discussions added spice to their dull lives. When Mahesh Thakur objected to it, Dixit said that Nirmala had been a mouth watering topic for officers of the company and everyone considered Thaku lucky to be her companion.

These engineers along with the labourers form the choric voice in the novel. They created discourses defining what was wrong and illegitimate. Since Nirmala had a scandalous past, their discourse was that anybody could have physical relationship with her.

Ujagar's mention of 'Clive Sahib' adds another dimension to the subaltern perspective in the novel. Comparing the sahibs who accepted his gifts with Clive, he further explained that the company officials mentioned by him led the life of British sahib-a life full of luxury and enjoyment. Thus, the Sahibs function as two groups mentioned by Ranajit Guha. They are the dominant group at the national level and at times they are

¹⁴Selected Works of Indira Goswami, opcit, p-155

equivalent to the all powerful foreign group. Characters like Ujagar form the dominant local group. These groups exploit the labourers who are the subalterns in the novel.¹⁵

The year 1968 is mentioned on several occasions in the novel. In that year labour organization was formed to fight for the rights of the labourers. The formation of the organization had brought some changes. Remembering the days before the formation of the organization, Harsul said that prior to the formation of labour union laboureres were made to work even on Sundays without any extra payment.

However, in the long run the labour organization failed to give the labourers a platform and they remained agency less. It only created another dominant group-the labour leaders. Joseph told Miyan that labour contractors and brokers tookadvantage of the famine and further exploited the poor labourers.Old Miyan found exploitation quite natural and saw nothing new in it.

The exploitation of the labourers in companies was a common thing. There was factory act to protect the interest of the labourers. But by nefarious means, the company owners violated the act to serve their own interest. The poor labourers often had to borrow money from money lenders like Pandey Maharaj at high rate of interest. The money lenders further exploited them.

There were writings on the wall- *stone shall answer bricks*, hinting at a strike to solve the problems of the labourers, but it did not happen. While the labourers continued to suffer, leaders like Ujagar became prosperous. *Mohua*, the local brew, destroyed lives of many labourers like Jaswant Singh. The dry and barren land left the labourers with only one option- work for the company. It resulted in surplus of labour and gave the

¹⁵Guha, Ranajit, *On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India*, in *Subaltern Studies I*,p-8

company the bargaining power. Under such circumstances, the labourers could not demand anything. Joseph informed Miyan that a huge number of people migrated to Korba from nearby areas to join the company. He further said that the paddy-fields these migrated people cultivated had turned barren. Even the cattles that had been their extra source of income had perished. They would work for the company at any price. The extra supply of labourer would lower their wages.

Ajij Miyan's character makes an interesting study. He excelled all other characters in the novel with his strong conviction and philosophy of life. While Harsul lacked a sense of belongingness, Miyan tried to belong to everyone. Again while Harsul tried to build a home for himself, Miyan intended to be a lifelong traveler- *musafir*. Fear of being caught by police, hostile weather and ailing health-nothing could deter him from his mission of building the mausoleum. But when his friend Joseph needed money, he gave the entire amount he deposited with Harsul to him. As apprehended by Harsul, Joseph deceived him. He even informed police about Miyan's suspected nationality. In his death bed Miyan told Harsul all the people he met were deceptive in appearance except Harsul. When he was sure that his friend would not return the money and Harsul would build the mausoleum, he declared that he did not have any sense of sin in the end of his life.

However, even Miyan is a subaltern. He came to India to see his mother in her death bed. Before her death she entrusted him with the task of building a mausoleum for her. Thus this refugee from Pakistan was entombed alive by the wish of his dead mother. He toiled hard to arrange for the money to fulfill his mother's last wish.

The end of the story certainly has a symbolic significance. As promised, Harshul builds a mausoleum for Ajij Miyan, and his mother. For Nirmala and other sufferers also life becomes an entombed dream.

3.04. *MĀMARE DHARĀ TAROWĀL*: BLUNT PROTEST BY THE SUBALTERN

Māmare Dharā Tarowāl (1980) is a masterpiece by Mamani Raisom Goswami that has earned her the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award in 1982. The novel is written from her first hand experience of closely observing the lives of the workers engaged in the construction of an aqueduct in river Sai of Uttar Pradesh. After all the hardwork, the labourers could hardly manage two square meals for their families, not to speak about other amenities of life. *Māmare Dharā Tarowāl* is a vivid realistic account of the sufferings of the poor labourers, especially the women labourers. Reading the novel is like a journey through a tough terrain to arrive at some sort of disillusionment. Her close observation of the characters and presentation of the reality in a bold and appropriate language give this novel a universal appeal, the resonance of which can be heard for long.

Narayani, a poor, beautiful and ambitious girl is the protagonist of the piece. Through her struggle, readers witness a perfect blending of social and emotional conflict. Through the character of the protagonist, Mamani Raisom interrogates several facets of women's empowerment in Indian society like gender discrimination, marriage, widowhood, poverty, sexual exploitation etc. At the prologue to *Māmare Dharā Tarowāl*, Mamani Raisom writes,

*I got the chance to stay at the 'work site' during the construction of an aqueduct over the river Sai in Raibareillie district. This novel is based on this labour strike. Here the outcome of the strike is being discussed which failed due to the lack of unity, farsightedness and sacrifice of the leaders. This novel depicts how the local leaders sabotaged this strike exploiting the weakness of the leaders and also the misery of the labourers who have fallen down a prey to this strike.*¹⁶

As mentioned by the novelist, the action of the novel centres round the strike called by the labourers engaged in the construction of an aqueduct on Sai river of Rae Bareli. But along with it, the novelist introduces the women issue and does justice to both the themes. In her inimitable style the novelist tells the story of the sufferings of the workers, women forced into prostitution and the cruelty of the management. Basumati, Lichu the lame, Narayani, Sibub Dhasla, Yasowant – all these characters have their individual problems. They either make compromise or perish. Discussing Mamani Raisom Goswami as a novelist, Prafulla Kotoky writes that her novels expose the hypocrisy, deceit and selfishness in whatever form it exists and *Māmare Dharā Tarowāl* is a perfect example of such exposure.¹⁷

At an individual level, the story of the novel can be read as Narayani's story. However, as Mamani Raisom has said in clear terms that she does not write about a particular individual, but about a class. Thus the novel becomes the tale of sufferings and humiliations of the entire labourer community. Narayani belonged to the sweeper community, a community that is placed at the lowest step in the caste hierarchy by different discourses. As a young beautiful girl she cherished a dream of a comfortable

¹⁶Gogoi, Hridayananda, opcit, p-26

¹⁷See *Selected Works of Indira Goswami*, opcit, p-xii

life and the only means for her to realize that dream was by becoming the wife of an officer. Women like Narayani were so tightly bound to their environment that they could not escape it. Hence she developed a relationship with a high caste engineer of the company, with the hope that her prince charming would rescue her from abject poverty and ignominy of low caste. But after a short but intimate relationship with her, the officer was transferred by the company as a punishment and Narayani was dejected to face the misery destined for *Harijan* labourers. Thus initially she tried to climb the social ladder and the society ruthlessly stood against her effort.

The way she was betrayed did not raise any issue amongst members of her community. So hard was survival itself for the community that no one seemed to be bothered by such incidents. Though the identity of their community always overshadowed their individual identity, they did not consider themselves a group, a characteristic shared by all subaltern groups. Most of them did not have the courage to defy the age old conventions and different discourses of the powerful classes of the society had infused a sense of inferiority into their minds.

Narayani was heartbroken at this betrayal. She controlled her anger and tried to lead the life meant for her caste and class. She set a new goal for herself-to be retained as a permanent employee of the company. She married Shibu Dhasla, a *Harijan* sweeper and became the mother of a child. Soon, her husband was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Her marriage can be seen as her effort to belong to her community which she tried to escape earlier. The burden of supporting her sick husband and the baby seemed too much for her. But she did not easily give up.

However, the betrayal in first love had made her harsh and she remained a rebel throughout the novel. With the unfolding of the story she could be seen rebelling against different discourses. The labourers did not have job security and lived under the constant fear of dismissal. As there was surplus of labour, the bargaining power was always with the owners. The rate of payment for the labourers varied from place to place. Even when in a job, life security was a far off dream. So the labourers formed an organization to raise these basic issues with the management. When their appeals and prayers failed, they decided to go on strike.

At the beginning, the labourers were very enthusiastic about the strike and they were prepared to face any hardship to fulfill their legitimate demands. But as days passed by experiencing hunger in its worst form, the labourers slowly lost their enthusiasm. Again, there were the tricks of the company owners and union leadership that were not understood by the simple and uneducated labourers. In the words of Prafulla Kotoky ,

*.....since the very inception of the strike, agent provocateurs engaged by the company as well as the Union leadership have become active. They come and cajole the few who count among the labourers , give them false hope, and cleverly plan for the failure of the strike.*¹⁸

Being the lone bread earner of the family, Narayani was against the strike called by the labour organization. Thus, once again she walked out of her community. She did all the petty jobs to support her family. The employers took advantage of the situation and they targeted the poor woman. Narayani had to submerge her personality for the very survival of her family. She entered into a forced a physical relationship with Thakur

¹⁸*Selected Works of Indira Goswami, opcit,p-xii*

Sahib, a powerful official of the construction company. But this time she did not have rosy dreams, rather she was led by the demands of the situation. When one night, two labourers Ramu and Bamu confronted her on her way back home from the Sahib's quarter and snatched away the money given by the sahib, she questioned them why they did not help her financially when she was in dire need of money during her pregnancy and sickness of her husband Dhasla. She also questioned the right of the organization to snatch away food from the poor labourers by calling the strike. She strongly declared that she would not hesitate to become even a prostitute to earn a living for her family.

The local labour leader Yashwont rescued her. Yashwont was a ray of hope for the entire *Harijan* community. He was the first educated person and a leader of the union from his community. This sober and soft-spoken young man soon realized that the selfish labour leaders would not be able to solve the problems of the labourers. They collected fees from the starving labourers to run the union and spent the collection on their own entertainment. They lacked the farsightedness to run a strike and that too with hungry poor and ignorant people.

Yashwont was full of sympathy for Narayani and the novelist has shown it on several occasions. But she was not the one to accept any one's pity. From her experiences she had learnt that a man's sympathy for a woman always had a selfish purpose. However, he continued to stand by her in time of need. He even promised her that he would take her with him if they had to go to some other place in search of job.

As the strike continued, the condition of the labourers became worse. Sheer starvation turned the labourers into beasts. If Basumoti, the old woman devoured watermelon, the children of the sweeper Barrack, eagerly waited for the rotis thrown for dogs at the

khalasi langar. The novelist poignantly describes how these children even fought with the dogs for a piece of roti. With the arrival of the Lodi Carpet Company, a new lease of life ran through the place. Starving and jobless labourers again started looking for avenues. Narayani was now looking after ailing Thakur Sahib at his tent in the Lodi camp site. Her short stint in a hospital as a sweeper and more than that her close relationship with the sahib had made her the automatic choice to look after him. The course of the narrative further tells us about various accidents that had killed several labourers and also hinted at impotency of Thakur Sahib. Though initially Narayani was dependent on the Sahib for money, now the sahib was dependent on Narayani for his survival. However, Narayani's assumption regarding the power of the sahib to impregnate her proved wrong and she became pregnant.

In Lodi Company, Narayani met her old lover Mr. Choudhury, the high caste engineer. He offered her monetary help. But she was not willing to take help from a person who had shattered her dreams. When he repeated the offer, Narayani dared to shut him up.

Thus Narayani strongly asserted her individuality. At this juncture, her utmost need was money that could buy her food for the family. But her hatred for the traitor was stronger than even the hunger of her baby. She preferred to sell her body to a person whom she did not love than to accept pity from a person whom she hated. It was not the morality, but her self-respect and broken heart that made her reject the offer of her old lover.

Though she tried to show a carefree attitude regarding her illicit affair, inwardly she was humiliated. This feeling of humiliation was infused into her mind by the choric voice and the discourse of the society. She tried for a job elsewhere, but found none. So again she was compelled to serve the Thakur. One night her husband led by Lichu arrived at

the Thakur's tent to find Narayani sitting by the Sahib almost naked. She took the axe from her husband and gave sleeping Sahib a lethal blow on the head. With the help of Shibu and Lichu, she buried the dead body on the bank of river Sai.

The strike ended without solving the issues for which it was called. The selfish leaders made secret agreement with the owners betraying the trust of the poor labourers. One leader in particular, Shastri was mainly responsible for the whole fiasco. Yashwont vowed to settle score with that traitor. While all the other leaders escaped, Yashwont still lived with his people. The novel ended with Yashwont's confrontation with Shastri after two years in the latter's own residence in a posh locality of Firoz Shah colony. The end of the novel indicated that Shastri was killed, because the sword that Yashwont was carrying this time was shining and not a rusted one. Thus the novelist also tells us that earlier protests of the labourers including the strike were like a rusted sword.

The labourers were used by the officers to serve their individual interest and that of the company. They were thrown out of their jobs once the purpose of the company was served. Then came the labour leaders as savior of the poor labourers. They united the labourers and called a strike to protect the interest of the labourers. The poor uneducated labourers also supported them. However, the strike worsened the condition of the labourers. Due to lack of unity, farsightedness and capability of the labour leaders, the strike failed miserably. Some of them made secret understanding with the company officials, for their own personal gain.

Through the failure of the strike, the novelist has shown that the poor and innocent labourers cannot face the obstacles created by the organized forces of exploitation. The organized forces include both the capitalist employers and local labour leaders. As

mentioned by Ranajit Guha, capitalist employers were the dominant group at the national level and the Union Leaders became the dominant local group. Even after formation of labour organization, power was not disseminated to free the labourers from economic, political and social suppressions. Kotoky observes,

*The novelist has shown the so-called labour leaders as cheap stuff and they are as much responsible for the suffering of the workers as the capitalist employers themselves. Thus she sneered at the avarice, greed and selfishness in high places. She has also shown that the budding awareness among the labourers as to their rights does not lead them far, for they hardly overcome the hurdles put before them by the organized forces of exploitation.*¹⁹

Like her other novels, this one also shows Mamani Raisom's sympathy for the oppressed and downtrodden class of the society. However, this self-asserted humanist does not champion the cause of the class, rather she reveals the reality. Her sympathy for the sufferings of the poor labourers neither arises from any political ideology nor from her sympathy for a particular class. Her strong belief in basic human compassion is the source of her humanism. Mamani Raisom advocates the kind of change that comes through compassion and piety and not through violence and bloodshed.²⁰

One would realize the novelist's sympathy for Basumati, Narayani or other female characters, but the novelist does not empower them by giving them a voice. Narayani, at times, asserted her individuality. She rejected the offer of help from her betrayer, fought

¹⁹ *Selected Works of Indira Goswami*, opcit, p-xiii

²⁰ See *Ibid*, p-xiii

like a tigress with Ramu and Bamu when they snatched away the money and finally killed Thakur sahib. This killing did not happen on the spur of the moment. Rather, it was the culmination of all the repressed anger and hatred that Narayani had carried against the society. Moreover, she did not repent any of these steps taken by her. In fact, she felt relaxed after killing Thakur.

In the end of the novel, Narayani had lost her mental balance. She was pregnant and felt guilty about her illicit affair with Thakur. If as a labourer, she had to do all the hard work like her male counterpart and face all the hardship of life destined for a labourer, as a woman she had to suffer more. The burden of bearing children against all odds, the dominance of the male and other unacknowledged household chores further worsen the conditions of women labourers like Narayani. Once Narayani was beaten up by a group of agitating labourers. This group suspected that she had an illicit relationship with Thakur Sahib. D.k. Baruah writes,

*The angry workers began to thrash her and one could hear the heart rending cry of Narayani on the bank of Sai for a long time. It woke up some in the labour lines. But the cry of a woman is such a familiar noise that none stirred from their doorsteps. After all, atrocities on women due to drunkenness were a regular event in the sweepers' barracks.*²¹

As a dalit woman labourer, Narayani had been ascribed three roles and these roles were restrictions. Her birth placed her at the bottom of the caste ladder created by the discourse of the society. Her position as a labourer burdened her with inhumane labour and as a woman she was bound to play the roles prescribed for the fair sex by the

²¹Satarawala, Kaikos Burjor (comp.) opcit,p-29

society. This novel can be read as the story of Narayani as a woman, as a dalit person and as a company worker- all moulded into one. As a woman she plays various roles- the role of a girl with a rosy dream, as the wife of a sick and obsolete husband, as the mother of a child. Her dreams as a girl are shattered at the initial stage and in the later two roles no personal space is given to her.

Spivak has mentioned that without economic independence all talks of women liberation are futile.²² Narayani's case offers a different picture. Despite being the lone bread earner of the family, there was no respite for her. Her husband Shibu led a more comfortable life than her. At times, he even spent her hard earned money on liquor and beat her up every now and then. Her husband could do that because the discourse of the patriarchy always placed wife much below her husband.

Thus, through discourses women were taught to believe that they must serve their husbands at any cost. The morality, integrity and honesty of a husband should not be questioned. Though the discourse makes the husband the protector of his wife, we see a role reversal in case of Narayani. Again the powerful discourse is at work. Even though her husband Shibu was invalid, he was her husband who provided her social security. The vermilion that she wore gave her some status in the society. Unmarried girls were treated with contempt.

Situation often changes the morality of the people because morality, ethics etc. are also constructed by different discourses created by the stronger group to protect their interest and they are influenced by situation. Lichu the lame guided Shibu to the tent where Narayani was expected to be with Thakur Sahab. They found Narayani almost naked by

²²See Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty's *A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: Mahasweta Devi's Standayini* in *Subaltern Studies V*, pp-102-103

the side of the sleeping sahib. When Narayani killed the sahib, Lichu was shocked and asked her why she had killed the person who had been providing her food. Hunger makes food more valuable than chastity of woman. Though Narayani rebelled against such social construct, inwardly she was also a victim of such constructs.

Mamani Raisom's bold narratives strongly serve the emotive purpose of language. Her similes and symbols make one realize the crude reality of life. The title of the novel itself is a symbol. The effort of the labourers to come out of the clutches of the strong management is like a blunt rusted sword.

3.05. *DATĀL HĀTIR UYE KHOWĀ HOWDĀ*: DOMINATING DISCOURSES AND THE SUBALTERN

Mamani Raisom Goswami's *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā* (1988)(English version: *The Saga of South Kamrup*, or alternatively, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, 1993) vividly brings out the superstitions, the abuse of power and the deadweight of oppression that widows have to confront. The locale of South Kamrup district is exquisitely depicted with its natural beauty and its poverty-driven, opium-addicted people in the *sattra*. The story can be seen as the story of widows, as a saga of the riot-landowner conflict, as a spectacle of the relationship between man and woman with the problems of caste and social hierarchies. This novel very convincingly narrates how women of the higher class society are made to suffer in the name of custom and rendered agency less. The novelist powerfully exposes the hypocrisy of Brahmins, their greed and lop-sided values, and the much ambivalence of their attitudes towards the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak. With the help of the characters of the novels

the novelist encompasses a large number of issues and makes reading of the novel an unforgettable experience.

When Giribala was brought to her ancestral home after the death of her husband, she found it difficult to live as a human being where in the name of custom and religion women's human instincts were suppressed. Giribala, since the death of her husband, had eaten only rice and boiled pulses with some vegetables. Unable to follow this anymore, she broke the restrictive rules that widows had to live by. One day, she tasted the forbidden mutton cooked with black beans, forgetting religion and rituals, wisdom and restraint. For the first time, a Gossain's daughter, in the manor house, had committed this heinous act. This single act of violation of rule can be seen as a protest against the social diktat. From the very beginning of the novel, there are various examples to show that social norms are not the same for men and women. Men, especially the powerful, followed rules of their own and society never objected to it. Regarding the Gossains' relationship with several women, one woman said that there was no harm if the Gossains had kept two women as wives and women should not consider it an insult.

However, the same society and even women did not tolerate little violation of the strict rules on the part of women. Irrespective of their class and creed, women, especially widows, had to live life like a beast of burden and only death could set them free from the drudgery.

From a feminist point of view this novel can be divided into three texts- Giribala's text, Durga's text and Saru Gosainee's text. Giribala is the young widowed daughter of the family, Durga is her father's widowed sister and Saru Gosainee is the wife of the dead paternal uncle of Giribala. Durga is shown as a sickly neurotic person who is frustrated

at not being able to go to Kashi. Symbolically she is waiting for her death. Saru Gosainee is described as a childless young and attractive widow. Giribala is the only character who dares to revolt against patriarchal discourse and has to pay the price for it.

The novelist has very movingly described the embarrassment and indignity of being a woman in orthodox Hindu family. As per the custom, a Brahmin girl must be married before she attained puberty or else, her family would be outcaste. Village women, spying for blood stained clothes of the unmarried girls, were their greatest enemies. Several women went around houses of families having unmarried girls spying for blood stained clothes, an obvious sign of menstruation. When they found such clothes, they would spread the news and as a result the girl and her family would be declared as outcaste.

This custom had made girls burden for the family to be disposed at the earliest. Giribala and Durga were given in marriage to much older men. Whoever and whatever the husband was, he ensured social security and status for a woman. In such a relationship emotions like love and respect hardly developed. Then also the women were taught to follow the paths of the *Sutees* even after the death of their husbands. Giribala revolted against such customs. She told Mark,

My father, the adhikar, said: Your future and Durga's future are now linked together.

Durga has found her path and you must follow her! You must observe all the rituals.

You must offer flowers, tulsi and water daily to your dead husband's wooden sandals.

*You know that her husband is like life's blood for a Hindu woman.*²³

²³Goswami, Indira. *Moth Eaten Howdah of The Tusker*,2005,p-198. Mamani Raisom Goswami's novel, *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā* was translated into English from original Assamese by the novelist herself under the title, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah Of The Tusker* and published by Rupa & Co. The quotation from the novel used in this Dissertation are taken from this translated version.

The words of the Adhikar also bring to light the attitude to treat widows as a class ignoring their individuality. Durga was an elderly widow who had lived for sixteen years a happy conjugal life. Giribala, on the other hand, was a young widow. Her husband Latu Gossain was a womanizer and had relationship with several women of lower caste. Adhikar's words certainly have an echo of the generalizing tendency of the dominant class, which Spivak rejected with regard to feminism and subalterns.

The real protest mode in Giribala is observed when she had come into contact with Mark Sahib, the young and attractive Christian European. Mr. Mark came to the Sattra to study and work on the old manuscripts preserved there. Giribala was engaged by her liberal brother Indranath to assist Mr. Mark. Giribala once went to him on a stormy night seeking his company to get rid of the haunting loneliness. For the conservative villagers, this was immoral and Mark Sahib was forced to leave the village forever for no fault of his. But Giribala had to pay a high price as a penance. The villagers, as suggested by the priest, compelled her to enter into a shed made up of dried leaves and timber for the purification of Giribala's soul. Though she was instructed to come out of the shed when it was lit, she did not come out. Instead of living life of virtual imprisonment, she considered it proper to end her life.

Through her death, the writer indirectly hinted at how with the help of orthodox and oppressive rules the hypocrite society relegated women to non-entity. Giribala's self immolation was different from *sati* rites as she had not sacrificed her life for her dead husband, rather by her death she had declared that she was attracted to a young Christian who understood her and cared for her. She is a gendered subaltern because even her supreme sacrifice has failed to bring any change to her class.

Durga, the elderly widowed sister of the Adhikar is the weakest of the three characters. After the death of her husband, she was often harassed by her in-laws. Even in her ancestral home she did not find any importance. She sincerely observed the restrictions imposed on widows and worshipped her dead husband's clog regularly more out of fear than out of respect. She had not even learnt to question these customs that had made her life hellish. She was deprived of her share of property and could not think of taking legal help as it would look odd for a high caste woman to step into the court premises. Durga pondered in private that even though she did not get her share of property from her in-laws, she would not dare to go to the court in Guwahati to fight for her rights. Her logic was simple- she was a lady from a respectable Gossain family and no lady from such a respectable family had ever crossed the boundary of the household to step into the court.

When she lost her gold trinkets, her only hope to take her to Kashi to immerse the ashes of her dead husband, she was frustrated and her health started to deteriorate. Ultimately she was taken to her in- laws house where she might die keeping with the dignity of a high caste society. Her miserable life exemplifies the fact that a woman's life has no meaning without her husband. She had to suffer humiliations everywhere as a widow. Interestingly, she herself accepted the rituals heartily as if strict observance of those customs would keep her soul purified. In both the cases of Giribala and Durga, it is seen that as they come to their parental home after losing their husbands, they enter into a community of gendered subaltern. This change of status, however, fails to lessen their sufferings. Moreover, they failed to understand the fact that they were fellow sufferers and hence could not form strategic essentialism, which could have made life a bit smoother for them.

Saru Gosainee was the young and beautiful widow of Giribala's uncle. She took up masculine responsibility in a male dominated society with perfect poise, but inwardly she also suffered from suppressed desire. She took the responsibility of looking after the vast land of three sattras and disciples with courage. But inwardly her life was a tale of silent monologue and dreams. With the rise of communism in the periphery of the Sattra, the revenue collection of the Gossain had drastically decreased. In order to collect the revenue, she had employed a man, named Mahidhar, a Brahmin. Ever since Mahidhar was appointed, Saru Gosainee's whole thought centred round him. She realized that she loved him, but could never express that love. The desire for sexual fulfillment made her a victim of deception as Mahidhar too appeared to be a fraud at the end.

Though no one had forced or advised Giribala, Durga, Saru Gosainee or even Gosainee to follow suttee rites, society had made life for them difficult than death. Gosainee, Giribala's mother, witnessed everything right from the beginning like a coward safe within convention. She blamed Giribala everytime she broke the social diktat and finally when she died, the mother, like an escapist, confined herself to loneliness and opium. Commenting on the condition of women presented in the novel, Sisir kr. Das writes,

*The world, here, is divided into two parts, like the history itself, one, the world outside, belonging entirely to men, to patriarchy; two, the world inside, designed for women, where living is not different from suffering.*²⁴The latter world meant for women was like a hell where individuality independent of Patriarchy was beyond thought. Women learn to live with their own shadows.

²⁴Hussain, Nikumoni ed.. Opcit,p-352

Through the depiction of the sufferings and protests of Giribala, Mamani Raisom Goswami has deployed a strategy to recreate the voice of the gendered subaltern. The society engages different agencies like social custom and religion to marginalize the women. The inevitable onset of menstruation, an indubitable sign of femaleness, is carried beyond all the humiliating social restrictions by the conservative society. For the parents, attainment of puberty is like a timer device, explosion of which would destroy the whole family. Likewise, *Amoti* (menstruation of Mother Earth) ritual observed by widows, add to the misery of their lives. The very thought of *Amoti* scared Durga and she shivered. As a widow she would have to observe the rigorous and inhumane rituals for three days. She would have to spend these days on a bed made of bamboo consuming only raw vegetables and fruits. She must not allow her feet to touch the ground. Even to answer nature's call she would have to cover her feet with barks of areca nut trees. Though Durga did not like these rituals she still observed them in the hope of salvation as taught by various religious discourses.

The only resort for these sufferers was economic freedom which was attained, to some extent, only by Saru Gosainee who looked after the land and property of her dead husband. Durga could not fight a case against her in-laws to get her share of property because in order to claim her share of property through legal means, she would have to break several discourses that would tarnish the image of the Gossain's family. Again, by breaking the discourses, she would earn a bad name for herself.

Durga believed that Saru Gosainee was respected by all because she had not challenged the social diktat. Both Durga and Gosainee admitted that Saru Gossainee got her things done by her disciples without ever setting her foot on land. She never went to Guwahati

to fight land litigation case. Thus she drew a perfect balance between her work and social norms.

The novel is a sordid tale of the sufferings of the women as subaltern. It is not about Giribala or Durga or Saru Gosainee's sufferings, it is the story of the sufferings and humiliation of the whole women community. A humanist par excellence, Mamani Raisom Goswami has very movingly brought forth the idea of being a woman in a tradition bound conservative society. Saru Gossainee told Durga that it was their lot to be born as women and patience and tolerance were the two cardinal rules to be observed by women, especially by widows that would make lives bearable.

Giribala's self-immolation is an important feminist statement, a silent protest where silence speaks louder than words. By her refusal to conform to the norms of patriarchal ideology she registers her voice for the oppressed class. However, her death does not change the condition of the oppressed. Though her protest is the strongest in the novel, her voice fails to reach that dialogic level where the protest can cause change.

The two male characters- Indranath, the would be Adhikar and Mark Sahib with their liberal attitude, sympathy for the poor and helpless could have been the harbinger of change. But they too are rendered helpless by the strong social customs of the sattra.

Hiren Gohain writes,

Both of them fail to stop the irresistible onward motion of the formidable, demonic machine, as it goes on crushing its intended victims. The foreign missionary "Mark Saheb" is immobilized by his moral scruples, and his religious training, and he fails Giribala in her moment of direst need and misery. Indranath, who had a modern

*education, has no faith in the superstitious customs But he too is held prisoner by the vast system based on property and supported by ancient tradition.*²⁵

Indranath in the novel is portrayed as an educated and idealistic young man. Numerous incidents from the novel can be cited to show that he did not follow the traditional customs of the *sattrā*. He allowed his widowed sister Giribala to assist Mark Sahib in his study, brought back his widowed aunt Durga from her in-laws to lead a meaningful life at her ancestral home and mixed up with people cutting across the barrier of class and caste. But the eventuality of these incidents only shows that he too was a subaltern. The relationship between Mark Sahib and Giribala that grew under his patronage ultimately brought public disgrace to his family and tragic death to Giribala. When Giribala was forced to go through the purification ritual, Indranath stood at a distance helpless.

Towards the end of the novel, his aunt Durga was sent back by him to her in-laws house to die a dignified death, because discourse had made the husband so powerful that even after his death, he controlled the life of a wife and his home was her ultimate abode.

Again when the Ceiling act was imposed by the Government, he did not subvert the law like the Gossain of the South Bank. He went to troubled Marabhita on elephant back with the intention to officially return the land to the poor farmers. But failing to understand his intention, the misguided farmers killed him.

As the would be Adhikar of the *Sattrā*, he was a powerful person. Moreover, he was also armed with modern and liberal education. But he never exercised the power whole heartedly. His lack of conviction to exercise his authority made him a subaltern. Mark

²⁵Gohain, Hiren. *Some Remarks on the Major Fictions of Indira Goswami* in Hussain, Nikumoni ed.. Opcit, p-322

Sahib's condition was also same. However, his background was totally different. He was a European and that made him powerful- a member of the ruling class. But in his missionary zeal to the study the culture of the *sattras*, he became a subaltern. He spent his life amongst the locals and mostly with the Gossains who treated him as inferior. He had to follow all the religious restrictions which to him were hollow. Thus his class rather than empowering him rendered him agency less. Though he was loved by the villagers for his pious and helpful nature, they failed to understand his liberal humanism and accused him of tarnishing the image of the Gossains, the law givers in the powerful *sattras*, by molesting Giribala. Gobinda Prasad Sarma has rightly observed that if Indranath's episode is seen as a sacrifice at the altar of the new politico-economic order, the suffering of Mark at the hands of the conservative villagers can be considered a suffering of the liberal humanist tradition in the conservative religious society.²⁶

The novel introduced three love stories which are integral to understand the prevailing customs in the *sattras*. Indranath developed a soft corner for Eliman, a poor Brahmin girl. But he could not marry her because she belonged to an inferior family both in class and caste. He could not even save her from being given in marriage to an old and wicked Brahmin from Koch behar. Since Eliman had attained puberty, it was impossible to find a match for her. According to the custom practiced amongst the Brahmins, a girl must be married before attaining puberty. Her grandmother told Indranath about women looking for Eliman's blood stained clothes. Once they came to know about Eliman's attaining puberty, they would ruin her life. Though the plea of the old woman touched Indranath's heart, he could not marry her, because he did not have the courage to break the strong customs and discourses.

²⁶ See Hussain, Nikumoni ed.. Opcit,p-331

Giribala's love for Mark Sahib was not reciprocated by the latter. The pious Sahib was full of sympathy and fatherly love for her. But Giribala wanted him as her husband and she was even ready to change her religion for that. She was ready to convert to Christianity in order to marry Mark. Giribala firmly believed that God had led Mark to the *sattra* to rescue her.

She expressed her desire to die in Mark's embrace. But Mark failed her when she needed him the most. Giribala believed that Mark was the man who could free her from the shackles of bondages. This can be seen as an echo of 'white man saving brown women from the brown men'. However, the white man in question Mark failed to rescue Giribala (brown woman) from the brown men, rather he himself became a victim of the rituals and discourses created by the brown men. So, Mark Sahib is also a subaltern.

In the third love story, Mahidhar, the poor Brahmin cheated Saru Gosainee who loved him and entrusted him to look after her property. She was to a large extent independent, however, not by nature, but by circumstances. A strong urge to fulfill her desires and the resultant inner conflict she underwent, made her a gendered subaltern. As soon as she found Mahidhar, she became totally dependent on him and the latter, taking advantage of her soft corner for him deceived her.

Throughout the novel it can be observed that the village women form a strong choric voice that work as an authority on the conduct of women. Be it the puberty of an unmarried girl, any violation in rituals to be observed by widows or love affairs- these were detected and spread by them. While the patriarchy created the discourses, the women were the custodian of such discourses. They worked as a device of the patriarchy to implement the rituals that suppressed their own sex. All women suffered in

the novel the dead weight of rituals, but they failed to form a group. Most of them did not even realize that they were exploited, because that was the kind of life they had been witnessing around them. When Durga was brought to her ancestral home, an old village woman advised Giribala's mother to send her back to her husband's place. Women believed the husband's place to be a heaven and any woman out of that heaven was like a naked woman roaming in the streets. People always misbehaved with such a woman.

Gobinda Prasad Sarma has made a very interesting observation about this novel. He said,

*The decadence and fall in the new political setup of a family of former glory and power forms the theme of the novel. This decadence and fall of the family takes place in the eyes of the author narrator of the story. She has empathy for the family in its simultaneous struggle for life and futile effort to assert its power and spent-up force; and yet as one who also sees the limitations of the family to survive in the new age with its new ethos, she sees the inevitability of the fall of such a family.*²⁷

Thus Mamani Raisom Goswami hints at a change in the whole socio-political order. The end of the novel can also be read as a warning that the all engulfing social change would destroy whatever stands in its way.

As hinted by Sarma the novel described the rise of communism to challenge the highhandedness of the *sattra*. Thus the powerless farmers gained some power initially. Many of them tilled the land ignoring the authority of the Gossains. Thus the Gossains who were at the centre of power were pushed to the margin. Bolo, Indranath's friend, asked one local communist leader, who inspired a mob to kill Indranath whether he

²⁷Hussain, Nikumoni ed.. Opcit,p-325

could distribute the land amongst the poor peasants after killing Indranath and whether they were contended now after thirty years of Indranath's death.

The leader could not answer and remained silent because the condition of the poor labourers had not changed. The poor farmers remained subalterns. They were uneducated and hungry and easily misled.

The story started in the year 1948, one year after India's independence. Though there was a change in the political scenario with the shifting of power from the British to the local Indians, for the common people nothing had changed. The benefits of independence were enjoyed by the powerful class. The commoners, especially the women remained subalterns as envisaged by Spivak.²⁸

3.06. NILAKANTHI BRAJA: DENIAL OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCT BY SUBALTERN

Nilakanthi Braja (1976), a masterpiece by Mamani Raisom Goswami (translated into English by Gayatri Bhattacharyya as *The Blue-necked God*) is a novel that highlights the exploitation and poverty of the widows, lepers and other destitute souls that throng the holy city of Brindaban to eke out their days in prayer in the hope of ultimate salvation. Mamamni Raisom Goswami has very painstakingly recreated the atmosphere of the holy *Braja* region with all its small and large temples as symbols of the glorious tradition of Hindu philosophy, the bathing *ghats* and cremation grounds on the banks of Yamuna river that are considered *swarga dwar*, the various festivals that are observed with all the pomp and gaiety. This novel is also a scathing attack on the religious hypocrisy by several agents of Hindu Religion in Holy places like Brindaban. It

²⁸See Morton, Spivak, Opcit,p-59

poignantly describes the decaying philosophy and morale, inhumanity of the various custodian of the religion, how widows are exploited in every sphere of life in the name of ultimate salvation and how the patriarchy and the Hindu law givers react to any exception to their religious discourse on the part of the widow. The novel throws light on how through different religious discourses it is infused into the minds of the women that widowhood is a punishment inflicted upon women for their faults and she must undergo the strict rules of widowhood for her purification.

The novel exhibits the novelist's genuine concern for women and from a feminist point of view this novel can be divided into three texts like *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā*- Saudamini's text, Mrinalini's text and Shashiprava's text. The travails of these three women trying to come to terms with their circumstances form the story of the novel. While Saudamini's text forms the foreground of the novel, the other two texts form the background. These two texts on one hand function as contrast to the main story and on the other hand help the novelist to portray the universal condition of the gendered subaltern.

Saudamini, the protagonist of the novel, is a young widow who has developed a soft corner for a Christian youth much to the worry of her pious and conservative parents. Hence they proceed to this holy *Braja* in the hope of bringing their daughter back to the track, i.e, to make her follow the strict code meant for a Hindu widow. Since she belongs to a high class Hindu society, second marriage is not at all an option for her. Thus her class, rather than empowering her, proves to be a hindrance for her. Societal and religious discourses have first made widowhood a curse and then force each widow to follow the hard rules. But Saudamini, an educated woman, finds it difficult to follow these diktats. Malashri Lal has rightly observed,

*Saudamini accepts analyses and finally rejects the construction of the widow stereotype-this is Indira's message –and it is also Indira's story. The message that is further pertinent to the empowerment agenda may be read through the tripartite presentation of three women in the novel, Saudamini and her acquaintances Shashi and Mrinalini.*²⁹

Through the character of the *Harijan* woman, the novelist has introduced the theme of untouchability prevalent in the holy place. When Rakesh offers her water, she does not touch the vessel. She is an expert dancer and knows all the mudras to please the Devi. However, she is not allowed to enter the temple. The reason is she is a *Harijan*- an untouchable. Thus she is a victim of the epistemic violence of the powerful upper caste. She does not protest, rather she obeys the discourse. She tells Rakesh, that she knows all the one hundred and eight mudras to worship the goddess. Since she can not enter the temple for being an outcaste, she dances outside the temple premise.

After the death of her husband, with the blessings of goddess *Katyayani*, she has devoted herself to Lord *Brajachandra* who, she believes, also takes pleasure in her, the same way her husband used to enjoy her. This belief has given new meaning to her lie. She believes in the words that love is not outward; something to please the eyes, but it is something to be felt with one's heart.

Thus the novelist portrays her as a foil to Saudamini. Her philosophy of life is not the ideal one, but it surely helps her to survive the hardship of life in *Braja*, that Saudamini and Mrinalini find difficult to face.

²⁹Hussain, Nikumoni ed.. Opcit,pp-309-10

Like her parents, Saudamini also initially thinks that with the passage of time she will be able to forget her Christian lover, much to the pleasure and relief of her parents. She tries to please her parents and follow the social diktat. She busies herself in assisting her father in his philanthropic venture of running his hospital he has opened to serve the poor and needy. In fact, her stay in the *Braja* can be seen as an effort to suppress her desire and prove herself a good daughter.

However, throughout her stay in the holy place she is tormented by the question how to overcome one's bodily desire. She even interviews various *Radheswamis* whether they have been able to surrender themselves totally to the lord and thus become indifferent to their desires. Large numbers of widows, known as *Radheswamis*, that come to holy Brindaban for ultimate salvation make her curious. Their skeleton like figures, an absurd hope of salvation by dying at the holy *Brajadham*, the challenge to save themselves from their so called saviours-the *Pandas* and goons, their devoted effort to save each alm for meeting the expenses of their last rites, their compulsion to chant the hymns to please Lord Krishna, the moral decay all around the *Brajadham* has made Saudamini rebellious and her parents see a failure of their project.

The class of subalterns known as *Radheswamis* is exploited by strong religious and social discourses. They come to the holy place in the hope of a decent living and a prestigious funeral as defined by Hindu law givers. Only means for them to earn their bread is chanting the name of the lord. The corrupt temple officials do not give them the meager amount they are entitled to. There is money to lookafter the poor *Radheswamis*. The money is given by rich people who visit *Braja* or by the temple trusts. But that money is looted by corrupt officials. Young and beautiful women are forced into prostitution or live with priests and *pandas*. While a section of *Radheswamis* accept the

provision, another section, especially the educated women from respectable families, find it hard to live in extreme poverty and sub-human living conditions³⁰

However, the exploitation does not end with their death. All of them save an amount for their last rites. Whenever, a *Radheswami* dies, the *pandas* first search for the money and valuables she might possess and then throw the body away, making a mockery of the belief of the *Radheswamis* that the *pandas* would help them to reach heaven by performing their last rites on the bank of Yamuna in a befitting manner.

The hard realities of *Braja* make Saudamini realize that spirituality may bring divine ecstasy, but cannot bring peace and comfort to the tormented soul. She cannot totally negate her emotion as an insubstantial and insignificant thing.

Whereas the *Radheswamis* consider it a holy duty to cling to the memory of their dead husbands, Saudamini is not perturbed by the memory of her dead husband. When asked whether the memory of her husband gives her any stimulation, she replies that she does not remember her dead husband and time has erased his picture from her mind. Saudamini is happy to forget him.

Saudamini soon realizes that her infatuation for the Christian youth has turned into a deep love- a feeling accentuated by her parents' treatment of the affair and also by the temporary separation from him. Her words accusing her parents signal her quest for a new meaning to her life. In clear terms she declares that she is not a *devito* spend her entire life supporting the philanthropic venture of her father. Like every ordinary girl, she too has certain wishes and desires. Serving the society cannot be the sole purpose of her life. Declaring herself independent of all fears and persons she calls her parents

³⁰ See Hussain, Nikumoni ed.. Opcit,p-338

hypocrites for suppressing her desires. Saudamini goes to the extent of calling her father a butcher.

Thus Saudamini expresses her desire. Along with that her realisation that *Braja* can not change her love for her Christian lover is revealed. The fact Saudamini does not, or rather cannot belong to anyone in the *Braja* aggravates her problem. When she looks for a job in order to be independent, she is told that youngwomen are not employed in *Braja*. Old *Radheswamis* can get a job at times. But even that is not encouraged.

Her university degree, like her high caste and class, becomes a hindrance in her search for an independent identity. *Radheswamis* may manage petty jobs there, but it is hard for Saudamini to find one. Her youth, beauty, education and parentage work against her effort to establish her own identity. Once she asks Charanbehari whether someone like her visited Brindavan earlier. Later she asks the same question to Rakesh. This signifies that Saudamini considers her situation is unique and she does not have anyone to belong to.

Charanbehari feels sympathy for her which infuriates Saudamini. She wants to see desire for her in his eyes. As her body does not get the attention she desires, Saudamini asks him if she has grown old and lost all the attractions of her youth. These words certainly have deeper meanings. Saudamini feels that by sympathizing, Charanbehari has placed her in the category of the *Radheswamis*, a class she cannot belong to. This negation of her physique shatters her whole entity, because the bodily desire is still very strong in her. She admits in front of Rakesh that she has not been able to change herself a bit even after staying in *Braja* for a long period. Her emotions, passions and zest for life have remained the same.

Throughout the novel Saudamini is in search of a community which she can belong to and can give her an identity. She rejects the community of the *Radheswamis*, the life of a widow and finally the union with her Christian lover. When her father arranges a meeting of her with her lover, she commits suicide after meeting him. A true Iconoclast, Ms. Goswami has given Saudamini a silent voice to protest against all the conventions. Her act of suicide can be seen as a protest against patriarchal discourse which makes widowhood a curse, marriage of a widow a crime and with an outcaste a heinous crime. In the hierarchy of discourse in Indian society, religious discourse prevails over other discourses. Hence, throughout the novel her lover is not named, he is *the Christian lover*. In her union with her lover, Saudamini also sees a victory for her mother as mother will win all the sympathy, turning her into a bad daughter. Religious and societal discourses have very strongly defined the role of a 'good daughter' and also of a virtuous widow. Regarding this union between her lover and Saudamini, Rajul Sogani comments,

*This brings Saudamini's inner conflict to a climax for if she disregards conventions for the sake of personal happiness, she will have to say good bye forever to the world she has been familiar with. She ultimately goes out alone in the raging storm to meet her lover, who remains, till the end, a mysterious and shadowy figure, like death.*³¹

Mrinalini is an aging spinster who is also deprived of a normal life. She has to look after her blind and crippled father and insane mother. Her father was a wealthy man who had led life of a profligate and now has to sell off his property and take shelter in a hovel. Her mother also adds to her difficulty as she gets into frenzy from time to time. She sees

³¹Hussain, Nikumoni ed., opcit, p-417

her dream of marriage and motherhood withering away as her family sinks into abject poverty. She once asks a group of *Radheswamis*,

*Could I not become a mother? Could I not have given birth to a 'divine' child? Why did I have to spend my whole life taking care of these two old scarecrows, being the 'keepers' of these two ghost-like old creatures? Tell me, has anyone else ever had to face such a situation?*³²

Her last question instantly refers to her loneliness. Like Saudamini she too cannot belong to any one. Moreover, Mrinalini brings the issue of economic independence of women. Due to financial hardship of her family she is deprived of a normal life. The poor financial decision of her father has destroyed her future and it throws light on the issue of dependence of a daughter on her father before marriage. While Mrinalini and Saudamini search for a community that resembles themselves, Shashi prepares herself to belong to a community. She is ready to make adjustments. Shashi does not blame any one for her situation. Rather she prays to the almighty not to make anyone else lonely and vulnerable like her.

With the selling of the temple by Mrinalini's father, Shashi loses her shelter and companion and as such, her loneliness is more tormenting than that of Saudamini and Mrinalini. However, her ability to adjust with the situation brings her some solace and makes her fit to survive. Deoghari Baba says that a person is his own friend, foe and loving mother and man can make his own destiny. This advice of the Baba hints at the essential loneliness of human being and also shows the way to live in a hostile world. Only Shashi succeeds in following this path as it becomes evident from her words,

³²Goswami, Indira. *Opcit*, p-141

*Even as I lay starving in the bylanes of Bonkhandi, I prided myself on my virginity. And even now that secret pride brings me pleasure. I do not worry about what people may say about me*³³

These words announce her freedom from the bondages of all sorts of discourses. From the very beginning, Shashi leads a life of compromise. All over *Braja*, she is known as Alamgadhi's companion. She is one of the several widows of Brindavan who assist the temple priests and live with them for physical protection and in the hope of getting a decent funeral after they die. Alamgadhi is her protector and savior. But she longs for a stronger and more passionate relationship. She is hopelessly in love with a young *swami* whom she can only gaze from a distance.

Shashi is different from both Saudamini and Mrinalini in various other aspects. While the two have been brought to *Braja* by situation, Shashi has been living in this place for years and even in her dreams she cannot think beyond this place. Again both Saudamini and Mrinalini find it very difficult to adapt to the living conditions of this place, but for Shashi, life is like it is in *Braja* and the hurdles in life are as natural as the sun and the moon. Finally in search of a shelter, Shashi goes to Mrinalini and in spite of her own pitiable condition; Mrinalini gives Shashi the much needed shelter, advice and inspiration. The two embraces each other in the deep darkness of Mrinalini's room. Apparently Mrinalini consoles Shashi, but it is much needed consolation for both of them. Though temporary, this companionship between Shashi and Mrinalini is important, because it creates a kind of strategic essentialism very much needed to fight loneliness.

³³Goswami, Indira. Opcit, p-67

The Deoghari Baba tells Saudamini's mother

*True, she is living in the midst of human wolves. But that does not matter. Do you not remember Sita?*³⁴

Here epistemic violence is at work. Epistemic violence is the use of law or language to marginalise or victimise specific people and groups. Spivak defines epistemic violence as the violence of knowledge and it includes the distortions, stereotyping and generalizing of third world women's conditions, as if they were all homogenously belaboured lacking agency.³⁵ In this novel, this violence is created by the patriarchal and religious discourses. Rules prescribed for women are hard to observe and patriarchy does not tolerate any violation of rule on the part of women. Women are advised to follow Sita as their role model, even amidst all sorts of brutality, and in Indian mythology, Sita stands for total self-surrender. However, patriarchy is silent on the virtuous paths prescribed for men by the same religion. Discourses try to merge the heterogenous identity of different women in *Braja* into one homogenous identity-*Radheswamis*. But Saudamini rejects this identity and thus she fails to form strategic essentialism. Thus with the help of these characters Mamani Raisom has shown different reactions by different characters to a particular situation. Saudamini's widowhood is not the substance of the novel; rather Mamani Raisom has focused on the social construct of widowhood.

The novelist has not portrayed many strong male characters in the novel. Alamghari, Charan Behari, Rakesh, Roy Choudhury and Thakur are the male in the novel that have been given some individuality. Mr. Roy Choudhury is a physician and is respected all

³⁴Goswami, Indira. *Opcit*,p-32

³⁵See Morton Stephen,*Opcit*,p-19

over *Braja* for his philanthropic venture. He follows the discourses of the society and tries to convince his daughter Saudamini to lead the life of a virtuous widow. Only when he realizes that it is impossible to persuade her, he arranges for her meeting with her lover. But in this effort of Mr. Roy Choudhury, a loving father is more visible than a social crusader. Rakesh is a great artist with high philosophy. He does not follow the diktats of society and hence he finds himself alone in *Braja*. When Thakur comes to *Braja*, he is blind and totally dependent on his daughter Mrinalini. Because of his spendthrift nature, his economic condition deteriorates and the insane wife adds to his burden. Unable to bear the hardship, he commits suicide. His suicide is not a statement like that of Saudamini, but a step taken by an escapist. Alamghari, the priest is an impotent. For years, he has been Shashi's protector. But once the temple is sold, he seeks shelter in another temple. Finally, he dies without heir. Charan Behari is a panda who has spent all his life in *Braja*. He belongs to the community of the pandas without any inner conflict. This sense of belongingness makes his character different from others.

3.07. CHINNAMASTĀR MĀNUHTO: RITUAL VERSUS RELIGION AND SUBALTERN REACTION

Chinnamastār Mānuhto (2001) is another masterpiece by Mamani Raisom Goswami. While all the other novels selected for this study, show her sympathy for the marginalized human beings, the primary focus of this novel is animal sacrifice in Holy Kamakhya temple. The novelist vividly narrates the horror, cruelty and superstitions related to animal sacrifice which adds to the range and variety of her themes. In doing so, Goswami has very cleverly and convincingly drawn a distinct line between religion and rituals. Though the story of the novel covers a period from 1921 to 1932, its range

is much wider. It covers the remote past with constant reference to history and myth. Again it is relevant to the present- especially the conflict between past and present.

Animal sacrifice for the appeasement of Mother Kamakhya forms the central theme of the novel. On one hand, there are the frenzied priests and devotees of Mother Kamakhya who support the age old ritual of animal sacrifice. On the other hand, there is the group led by *Jatadhari*, the ascetic from *Chinnamastā* that opposes blood sacrifice. Drawing characters from different walks of life, Mamani Raisom has created the fiction based on various lores related to Kamakhya Temple, one of the major piths of *Shakti* cult in India. With her powerful language and apt use of image and simile, the novelist has drawn continuous parallels between the animals brought for sacrifice and human beings, especially the women. Drawing materials from history, religion, folklore and rituals the novelist has faithfully captured the lives centering Kamakhya temple in the pages of the novel.

Dorothy Brown is a childless woman married to Henry Brown, a Professor of Cotton College. When she discovers that her husband has developed an illicit relationship with a Khasi woman, she is devastated. She comes to the ascetic from *Chinnamastā*, also known as *Jatadhari*, for solace and takes shelter in Darvanga. Dorothy's entry into the territory of Maa Kamakhya, Assam's most famous temple of the *Sakta* cult, has created furore. She has been an object of curiosity for the locale. While a section is skeptic about her real intention of coming to the temple, another section like the hermit from Torsa directly opposes her stay in the holy place.

Jatadhari with his strong assertive voice against animal sacrifice at the Devi's altar has earned several enemies. The frenzied priests who are determined to continue the age old

ritual of blood sacrifice are against him. They firmly believe that Maa Kamakhya's thirst can only be quenched by blood. *Jatadhari* and his followers put forward the argument that even flowers and fruits can be offered for Devi's prayer in lieu of blood. Ratnadhar, the artist and *Jatadhari*'s close aide tells Bidhibala that there is mention of alternative provision to worship Maa Kamakhya in *Kalika Purana*. White gourd, melon, sugar cane, alcohol etc are equally dear to the goddess like animal's blood.³⁶

Dorothy Brown, in order to establish her identity, has also infuriated a lot of people. By walking out of the relationship as a mark of protest against her husband's illicit affair, she has challenged the authority of her husband at an individual level and patriarchy as a class. Moreover, her decision to stay at the shelter of *Jatadhari*, an Indian and hence a colonial subject has enraged the British. Her entry into the territory of Maa Khamakhya has been used as an opportunity by her enemies to attack her physically and mentally. *Jatadhari*, who is portrayed as a superhuman in this novel, has also been targeted for sheltering Dorothy by the priests in the name of religion.

Undeterred by all these attacks, both *Jatadhari* and Dorothy move on their respective missions. The ascetic leads the group of students from Cotton College in their non violent protest against blood sacrifice. Their signature movement gains momentum, much to the horror of the opponent group. He also guides many tormented souls through the path of peace. Dorothy Brown, on her part, copes with her new life very fast and befriends the locales. Her husband Mr. Brown persuades her to stay with him. But she is determined to lead an independent life.

³⁶ See Goswami, Indira. *The Man from Chinnamasta*, 2006,p-105. The original Assamese novel *Chinnamastār Mānuhto* is translated into English under the title *The Man From Chinnamasta* by Prashant Goswami and published by KATHA in the year 2006. All the lines from the novel quoted in this dissertation are taken from this translated version.

Ratnadhar is the son of a priest and a strong supporter of *Jatadhari's* campaign against animal sacrifice. Under the inspiration and guidance of *Jatadhari*, he has drawn several paintings based on the history and myth related to Kamakhya Temple. Though otherwise a meek character, Ratnadhar plays a strong role in the fight against blood sacrifice. His love for Bidhibala has also been narrated in the novel. Bidhibala is a helpless daughter of a powerful devotee of the goddess from Sualkuchi-Sinhadatta. Her marriage has been fixed with a rich aged person who owns four or five granaries, one wife and two daughters. The reason is-there has been a rumour that Bidhibala has already attained puberty. So her father frantically looks for a groom.

Bidhibala's father is very happy to find the match because the would be groom is a respectable landowner who wants to marry again because he does not have a son. Since he is very rich, Bidhibala will lead a comfortable life.³⁷

Apart from justifying the age difference between the couple, these words have certain other connotations as well. Discourse of the society, or rather, patriarchal discourses prioritize boy over girl. So, the second marriage is justified for the man as the society believes that the sex of the child depends on the mother.

Sinhadatta has come to the temple with his family to offer a buffalo at the Mother's altar for Bidhibala's welfare. More than anything else, Bidhibala is hurt at the fact that an innocent buffalo will be killed for her sake. During their stay at Manomohan priest's house, she has befriended Ratnadhar, the son of the priest. With his help, she sets the buffalo free, much to the displeasure of her father who vows to annihilate the 'culprit' and sacrifice more buffaloes at Devi's altar. Ratnadhar is beaten up badly by Sinhadatta

³⁷ See Goswami Indira, *Opcit*, p-94

on suspicion of being the ‘culprit’. Bidhibala runs away with a group of prostitutes to escape the suffocating life she is forced to live by her tyrant father. When she is brought back, she is dead.

Jatadhari comes back to the temple after a long period of absence with Dorothy. The choric voice created by the priests suggests that she is now pregnant. *Jatadhari*’s group has already collected huge number of signatures in support of their movement against animal sacrifice. Amidst all these, Dorothy is killed during the celebration of *Devadhani* festival in the Temple and there is a strong hint that her former husband is behind this killing.

Jatadhari now prepares himself for the final battle. He inspires his followers to sacrifice their own blood at Devi’s altar if the need arises to stop bloody beheading of innocent animals. When the group marches up to the chief priest to present their petition to him, their opponents surround them and challenge them to offer their flesh and blood before stopping animal sacrifice. *Jatadhari* rises to the occasion and cuts a piece of flesh from his body and offers it to Mother Kamakhya. His young disciples also follow him and the sacrificial altar is drenched with human blood.

Thus the novel can be read as a conflict between liberal humanism and age old superstitions in the name of religion, between religion and rituals and between violence and non violence. Other issues like atrocities of the British, people rendered helpless by different discourses and Mamani Raisom Goswami’s main concern- the sufferings of women also find place in the narrative of the story. With the mastery of the novelist, all these issues are merged into the main theme of the novel.

Dorothy with her softness of heart and amicable disposition proves herself a foil to the image of the colonizers. She helps the needy locale. Dorothy's decision to come and stay in the holy place of the Hindus is a slur not only upon Henry's social standing but an insult to the whole British empire. So Henry comes to Kamakhya to take Dorothy back with him. But when Dorothy refuses to go referring to his illicit relationship with the Khasi woman, Henry explodes and calls Dorothy a whore. He further says that she has come to bear the child of *Jatadhari*.

Here Henry totally ignores the 'cause' (his illicit affair) and focuses on the 'effect' (Dorothy's decision to stay with *Jatadhari* is an insult to the Empire). This professor both as a member of the powerful class and a male tries to dominate Dorothy. As a ploy to prove himself right, he tries to tarnish the image of Dorothy.

Dorothy is strong in her conviction and knows clearly about her future course of action. When the clerk tries to persuade her to keep the servant sent by Mr. Brown with her for her own safety, Dorothy sounds assertive and strongly objects. She declares that she does not have any relationship with Brown and will take all decisions regarding her life all by herself. She even tells the clerk that Mr. Brown should never visit her in future.

Dorothy asks her friend William to make a will of all her property in the name of the child of the Khasi woman with whom her husband is having an illicit affair. When William reminds her that the Khasi woman is not legally married to her husband, she says that even though the child is a bastard, she will make a will in its name.

Dorothy helps Pulu, a poor drummer, financially and this spreads like a wild fire. Now, poor people from different areas throng around her habitat seeking help. They have been exploited by the whites. The British government needs a huge sum to maintain the

Assam Regiment, which they need to control the peacekeeping volunteers. So they levy taxes on the poor natives. When the natives find it hard to pay the ever increasing tax, they start selling their belongings, even utensils of day to day use. Thus the Britishers (the powerful foreign group) have rendered large section of poor farmer agency less to serve their own interest and done that by robbing the poor of the economic freedom.

After the rape attempt on her, Dorothy goes to the Police station to identify the culprit. She is fully aware of the fact that the agents of the empire will not be kind to her as she has challenged the power of the British. Dorothy Brown's murder is an indirect message that anyone who lowers the dignity of the Empire will not be allowed to survive. Rajul Sogani observes that Dorothy is killed for challenging the power of the mighty empire by challenging the unwritten rule that an Englishman can keep a native mistress and give his property to her and her children, but an English woman cannot keep the company of the local Indian. She cannot take any interest in their affairs.³⁸

By walking out of the relationship with Henry, Dorothy also walks out of the British community. In Kamakhya, she tries to enter into the community of the locales. For the women, she is an object of curiosity and they do not accept her as one of them for two reasons- she is a Christian and she is immoral. However, the young students and Ratnadhar accept her. She finds a community in the group who are against blood sacrifice. Thus though she is not totally rendered agency less like Bidhibala, she is a subaltern. It is because of the towering personality of *Jatadhari* that Dorothy is accepted by a minority in the Temple premises. However, she remains a untouchable for the locales and she is not allowed to enter the temple. Again, her protest is never understood by the British and her brutal killing does not create a furor.

³⁸ See Hussain, Nikumoni ed.. Opcit, p-420

Throughout the novel a tug of war is witnessed between the two main groups- the group led by *Jatadhari* and the section of the priests who support animal sacrifice like the hermit from *Torsa*. Threatened by the ever increasing support for *Jatadhari's* drive to stop animal sacrifice in the holy *pith*, the hermit from *Torsa* curses *Jatadhari* and his followers. He tells the goddess will destroy them and drink their blood.

Jatadhari's followers insist on offering their own blood if the need arises to please Maa Kamakhya to stop animal sacrifice. The hermit from *Torsa* goes a step further and sings the glory of human sacrifice that has been banned by the colonial ruler. He says that with the banning of human sacrifice at the altar of Maa Kamakhya by the British, the goddess is angry and evil spirit has entered the land. This sin can be redeemed only by sacrificing the sinner. One can become the lord of the universe by sacrificing himself to the goddess as human blood is the nectar of the goddess.

The young students of Cotton College obviously have the access to western thoughts through their education. Their liberal education has a British legacy. However, as the story of the novel shows the British liberal education has not been able to destroy the edifice of Indian philosophy and culture. The novelist has cleverly shown the drawbacks and narrowness of the Britishers. In matter of religion, they follow a policy of non-interference in the greater imperial interest. By encouraging each community to follow its own rituals, they have succeeded in maintaining the disharmony. Though they pretend to be more civilized than the devotees who sacrifice blood, Aruna Chakrabarty draws a parallel between the 'civilized' Britishers and blood thirsty devotees of Maa Kamakhya. The whites often kill birds during their routine target practice. Beneath their

civilized exterior lies their brutality which is exposed in their torture of the natives and meaningless killing of birds.³⁹

Moreover, Dorothy's killing also justifies this observation. Spivak has mentioned in her essay that the banning of *sati* rites by the British has been projected before the rest of the world as 'white men saving brown women from brown men' with the help of discourse.⁴⁰ Dorothy's surrender to *Jatadhari* can be seen as 'a brown man saving a white woman from white men'. The colonial ruler cannot let this happen. Aruma Chakrabarty puts forward certain interesting observations regarding the *Jatadhari*-Dorothy relationship.

*Who is the 'Jatadhari'? is he a real man or a symbol? Is it possible that in him, the author seeks to present an embodiment of the true spirit of Hinduism in which inclusion, unity and love are the chief components? Does the child that Dorothy carries in her womb represent a potential coming together of East and West- a possibility brutally destroyed by narrow Imperial interests?*⁴¹

There are several passing references to the atrocities of the British in the novel. Deba, the maid in Ratnadar's house says that no one in the world can fight the British. Their taxes have made commoners beggars, but no one has the courage to raise a voice of protest. Another Brahmin laments that under British rule Brahmins no more enjoy the status of law giver and custodian of religion. He is afraid that by collecting huge number of signatures, *Jatadhari*'s group may even stop animal sacrifice.

³⁹ See Hussain, Nikumoni ed., *opcit*, p-317

⁴⁰ See Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* in Nelson, Cary and Lawrence Grossberg's *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 1988

⁴¹ Hussain, Nikumoni ed.. *OpCit*, p-317

Though the story of the novel covers a period from 1921 to 1932, it certainly has present day relevance. But the timing has given the novelist the opportunity to introduce the attitude of the colonial power towards the local Indians. Since animal sacrifice is still very much prevalent in the temple there might be a feeling amidst a section of readers that the novelist could have done more justice to theme by placing it in a contemporary time frame. But the period of 1930s has provided the novelist the opportunity to portray Assam under colonial rule. Moreover, this time frame has enabled her to draw parallel between the brutalities of the British and that of the locals who supported animal sacrifice.

In the hierarchy of discourses, the religious discourses prevail over other discourses. However, at times economy controls the religious discourses. Ratnadar's father Manomohan tells his wife Bishnupriya that they will get a huge sum as a group of pilgrims will soon visit the temple. This group will offer buffalo to the goddess.

This is the reason why a section supports animal sacrifice in the temple. If animal sacrifice, on one hand, earns them money, on the other hand it makes their position much more important. They claim that they are the ones who know the rituals of sacrifice. In the essay *Productive Labour, Consciousness and History: The Dalit Bahujan Alternative*, Kancha Ilaiah writes,

Prayer is a weapon in the hands of a Brahmin. It sets him apart from the rest of the masses. It is through this prayer that he establishes his hold over the rest of society. In a fit of madness, which might be a result of their lifelong alienation from work, life itself

*begins to appear to them to be meaningless. They call this madness the life of penance.*⁴²

They often quote from scriptures like *Kalika Puran* to authenticate their point. However, the same scriptures mention about alternative provisions. One follower of *Jatadhari* says that *Yogini Tantra*, a powerful scripture of *Shakti* worship recommends flower for the worship of the goddess. There is mention that status of flower is higher than blood and offerings of flower can earn one a place in the land of the sun. But they intentionally overlook the alternative provisions as observance of this provision will make them less powerful. They try to command respect by threatening the common people in the name of god.

Most of the devotees are illiterate and the priests are their interpreters who quote from various religious scriptures to serve their own purpose. Their ignorance of Sanskrit has given the priests the opportunity to form discourse of convenience to continue animal sacrifice. Again because of the powerful religious discourses, in hierarchy of groups the Britishers (the powerful foreign group) are almost at par with the priests (the powerful local group at the national and local level) at least within the temple premises.

Through such discourses and counter discourses, truth is constructed in the society. The whole novel is full of discourse and counter discourse over the issue of animal sacrifice. An elderly devotee of *Jatadhari* dares the hermit from Torsa to lead by example. The hermit from Torsa curses *Jatadhari's* group and supports the discourse that self sacrifice is the highest form of sacrifice. Now *Jatadhari's* group asks him to sacrifice his own blood giving example from history.

⁴²Kancha Ilaih *Productive Labour, Consciousness and History: The Dalitbahujan Alternative* in Amin, Shahid and Dipesh Chakrabarty (ed) *Subaltern Studies IX*,2008,p-195

When Bidhibala sees the calf that will be sacrificed for her well being, bellowing, she prays to the Almighty to take her life and spare the innocent calf. Drawing a parallel between Bidhibala and the calf, the novelist narrates how Bidhibala prays to the goddess to spare the innocent buffalo. She even asks the goddess to take her life in lieu of the animal. The scared look of the animal has pierced through her heart. She is hurt more by the fact that the animal will be sacrificed for her welfare. Then Bidhibala thinks about her future if the old man marries her. She is determined not to be the wife of the person who has been married to another woman for long ten years. She wants to express her wishes and even to rebel. But due to the dominance of her father Sinhadatta, she can never express her wishes. So strong is his dominance that even his mother is not heard. When she objects to the marriage of Bidhibala to that already married aged person, Sinhadatta shuts her up.

When Bidhibala meets Ratnadhar who admires her, she asserts her individuality. As Ratnadhar tries to persuade her to read *Kalika Puran* referring to the alternative provision other than animal sacrifice mentioned in the book, Bidhibala says that she will not read any scripture that recommend animal sacrifice. However, Bidhibala wants to worship Maa Kamakhya. She tells Ratnadhar that she intends to offer her songs to the goddess. Her songs are created from her tearful, unspoken words. She also intends to worship the goddess with all her sorrows that are weighing her heart.

Thus through Bidhibala's character, the novelist has made her stand clear with regard to her attitude to the worship of Maa Kamakhya. The novelist is not against the worship. But with great mastery she has shown how rituals are different from religion and with her detachment, the novelist has shown different voices regarding animal sacrifice. While handling with a sensitive issue like religion, the novelist has presented her side

very carefully. With quotations from Holy Scriptures, university journals and government documents she has, without asserting her personal opinion, which is very strong in this issue, given an edge to *Jatadhari's* group.

Bidhibala's escape with the group of prostitute and her death can be seen as her protest against patriarchy and suppressing religious customs. Her self-imposed death amounts to suicide. Her death is a statement of protest, but the agencies against whom she protests fail to decipher the meaning of her statement. Thus she remains a subaltern in the novel.

Bishnupriya, Ratnadhar's mother, is another gendered subaltern in the novel. Bishnupriya represents a class in the novel- the wives of the powerful priests who are never involved in discourse making. She has spent her life cooking for the *jajmans*. Despite daylong hard labour, women like her do not complain against or demand anything from their husbands. But she is a mother and whenever there is an issue related to their children, she raises her voice. When Singhadatta curses Ratnadhar, accusing him of eying his daughter and also as the man behind the disappearance of buffaloes brought for sacrifice, the mother in Bishnupriya cannot take any more and confronts Singhadatta. She threatens to curse him. What Bishnupriya does is shocking because for the priests the pilgrims are the patrons and Singhadatta is an affluent person who regularly offers sacrifice at the Maa's altar. The pilgrims are never harshly treated. Moreover, Bishnupriya is a meek character and even her neighbours hardly hear her speaking. But the woman who bears everything silently is also a mother and the mother in Bishnupriya knows to stand for her child.

Bishnupriya adds another dimension to the women issue. There is a sharp contrast in the temple premise. On one hand, the powerful priests worship mother goddess and on the other hand women in their own house have no freedom. As wife of a priest, Bishnupriya is revered by others. But she does not have her own individuality. She is engaged in cooking and serving the devotees who are their patrons also.

In the end of the novel, the ascetic from Chinnamasta also makes sacrifice by cutting a piece of flesh from his body to offer at Maa's altar. When a comparison is made between his sacrifice and that of Bidhibala, Bishnupriya and others, the effectiveness of the sacrifice becomes clear.

Jatadhari is a towering personality in the novel and the novel is aptly named after him. This former student of history acquired spiritual power through meditation. He speaks very little and there are several myths related to him- snakes harbor in the coils of his hair, his physical energy, healing power and such other superhuman qualities make him a mysterious character. The mysteries surrounding his character complements the mysteries related to Maa Kamakhya's temple.

He strongly leads the movement against animal sacrifice. Such is the impact of this movement that the strong lobby supporting blood sacrifice is worried. Referring to *Jatadhari's* role in the anti-animal sacrifice movement, a priest comments that because of him even the sons of priests have joined the movement to stop animal sacrifice. The priests feel that being a member of their own class, *Jatadhari* should not try to destroy the ancient rituals of the temple. But *Jatadhari's* arguments and conviction are stronger and even with a great devotion to Maa Kamakhya, he can fight against animal sacrifice.

His sacrifice at end of the story proves a harbinger of a positive change as the novel concludes with a message that *Jatadhari's* group can sacrifice even their lives to stop animal sacrifice and as they are growing in number, in near future animal sacrifice will be banned in the holy temple.

Thus *Jatadhari's* sacrifice brings a positive change to the society, while the other sacrifices fail to bring any change either to the society or to the class of the subaltern who make the sacrifice.

3.08. DISCUSSIONS

The feminine consciousness in Mamani Raisom Goswami's novel is very strong and in all her novels a woman is at the centre of action or rather, the action of all her novels centre round women. While describing various facets of womanhood, the novelist has shown time and again patriarchy as the most dominant group that suppresses women using different discourses and agencies. As a system of domination patriarchy takes different forms. Sexual aggression, treating women as absolute sex, beating, scolding, taunts and anger, prioritizing of male child, rigorous customs, widowhood etc are some of them. Even women are used by patriarchy to exploit women.

Simon de Beauvoir, in her Introduction to *The Second Sex* wrote,

*Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being..... For him, she is sex- absolute sex, no less.....He is the subject, he is the Absolute-she is the other.*⁴³

⁴³Beauvoir, Simon de. *The Second Sex*, 1962, p-26

In patriarchy, men assume the dominative role and prescribe the dominated role for the women. Because women are made silent by various discourses of the patriarchy, men automatically assume the dominative role. Beauvoir's concept of 'othering' the woman is very important to feminist criticism as this 'othering' has brought patriarchy into existence. Many women internalize patriarchal values and through their action perpetuate it. A perfect example of this class is the character of Gosainee in the novel *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā*. As the wife of the Adhikar, she is a powerful character and as such she is expected to stand for other destitute women, especially the widows. When her young daughter Giribala comes back to the house as a widow, she is hurt. But at the same time she expects her daughter to follow the strict rules religiously like her aunt Durga. Every time Giribala breaks rule, Gosainee punishes her. Her silence against the dominance of patriarchy is not merely negative; it also makes space for patriarchy and further domination. She is responsible for perpetuating patriarchy in the following ways-

- i) By refusing to change herself
- ii) By not rebelling against patriarchy and
- iii) By dominating those who are weaker

Durga also follows the rigorous rules without questioning them and expects her niece Giribala to do the same. She even refuses to live with Giribala as the latter does not follow the rules and restrictions meant for a widow. Thus both Gosainee and Durga are gendered subaltern who have not even learnt to question. Though situation has compelled Saru Gosainee to take certain masculine responsibilities, internally she also wishes to lead a normal life with a husband. Her love for Mahidhar brings a sense of

guilt to her because she has internalized the strong discourse of patriarchy that a widow should never think about another man. The dominance of patriarchy has pushed these gendered subalterns to the periphery.

However, there are few characters that boldly revolt against patriarchy and question the authenticity of the discourses made by patriarchy. To begin with there is Giribala in the novel *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā*. This daughter of the Adhikar does not obey the rules defined by society for a widow because she feels that these rules are hollow and make the life of a widow hellish. She breaks rules and when she is forced by the elders, undergoes purification process and then again breaks rules. Thus she is a fearless rebel. By expressing her love for ‘Christian’ Mark Sahib, she has prioritized her desire over social diktats. She ends her life to protest against the high handedness of the discourses that oppress women.

Saudamini is another rebel from the novel *Nilakanthi Braja*. Again she is a widow in love with a Christian youth. Initially she tries to please her parents, in other words the society, by suppressing her emotions. She comes to *Braja* to lead a life expected of a widow. But when she realizes that her love for the Christian youth is too strong to be forgotten, she revolts. In the meanwhile, she also realizes the hollowness of the lives led by *Radheswamis*. As the conflict between what she wishes and what is expected of her by the society grows, the father, much to her surprise, brings her lover to her life. But instead of leading a life with her lover she commits suicide. This act of suicide is a statement of protest against male domination.

Bidhibala in the novel *Chinnamastār Mānuhto* is a meek character. However, her subdued personality also rebels against the ritual of animal sacrifice in Holy Kamakhya

Temple. Her father Sinhadattta is a perfect representative of dominant patriarchy. Unable to express her anger against her father, she escapes with a group of prostitute and ends her life by a month long fasting.

Some other women characters like Mrinalini in the novel *Nilakanthi Braja* , Narayani in *Māmare Dharā Tarowāl* also make protests against the situation in which they are forced to live. Directly or indirectly they also point accusing fingers on patriarchy. All these characters protest both through their words and actions. But none of them is able to change their condition. In other words, their protests fail to reach the dialogic level of utterance where it can cause the change. The intended listeners, patriarchy in most cases, either fail to decipher the meaning of their protest or do not pay any heed to it. Thus these characters are gendered subalterns. Even though the group of gendered subaltern is heterogeneous in nature and a loosely formed one, the gendered subalterns in Mamani Raisom Goswami’s novels share the following common features-

- i) They are lonely.
- ii) Silence has been their response at one stage or the other to the domination they are subjected to by the patriarchy.
- iii) Their action speaks louder than words.

The loneliness of the gendered subalterns in Mamani Raisom Goswami’s novels results from their inability to belong to any community. Saudamini is horrified at the very thought of living like a *Radheswami*, Giribala cannot live like her aunt Durga as advised by her father, Bidhibala cannot join her family in the sacrifice of the buffalo to worship Mother Kamakhya and Narayani cannot join the workers’ strike.

The domination of patriarchy through different machineries is so strong that women, even the strong ones, resort to silence when they realize that their words cannot bring any change to their conditions. This silence, at times, amounts to conformity to the gender defined roles prescribed by patriarchy. In the essay *The Mentality of Subalternity: Kantanama or Rajdharmā*, Gautam Bhadra writes,

*It is well known that defiance is not the only characteristic of the behavior of subaltern classes. Submissiveness to authority in one context is as frequent as defiance in another. It is these two elements that together constitute the subaltern mentality.*⁴⁴

Only when their conformity to the rules comes in the way of their strong desire or self-respect, they take bold steps such as suicide.

Their silent actions are always far more effective than their speech. It is because the patriarchy always takes their existence for granted. The age old network of female domination is so widely practised in society that not only the men, but also many women accept it as natural. Their physical, emotional and political entity is totally ignored. For many women death becomes far more respectable than living a life of perpetual humiliation.

There are few male characters in Mamani Raison's novels that can be termed as subalterns. Sadashiva in the novel *Chenābar Sōt*, Harsul and Ajiz Miyan in *Ahiraṇ*, Indranath and Mark Sahib in *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā*, Roy Choudhury and Rakesh in the novel *Nilakanthi Braja* etc are the subalterns who are sidelined from the hegemony of the powerful class. Sadashiva is a poor labourer who is exploited by officers like Waaz and ultimately is killed in a tragic accident which occurs due to the

⁴⁴Bhadra, Gautam. *The Mentality of Subalternity: Kantanama or Rajdharmā* in Guha, Ranajit (ed) *Subaltern Studies VI*,2008,p-54

negligence of the company. Once he tries to protest against the officers and as a result he becomes the victim of their atrocities. His case is a perfect example of how the subaltern voices are thrashed by the powerful class. Harsul is an engineer in the construction company and in an apparent look he is the member of the dominant group- the company officers. But he can not belong to this group. Without this sense of belongingness he remains a subaltern in the novel. As the officers exploit the poor labourers, Harsul too is exploited by the company which he serves for a long period with utmost dedication.

Likewise, Indranath and Mark Sahib are two strong characters from the novel *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā*. Indranath is the would be Adhikar of the *sattra* and as such he is the second in power hierarchy next to his father. He is an educated youth with a liberal bent of mind. But he too is bound by the strong social and religious customs. His class and position automatically place him in the powerful discourse making group. By giving some freedom to his widow sister Giribala, he tries to introduce modernity to the conventional *sattra* atmosphere. But so strong are the discourses that even Indranath is rendered helpless.

Mark Sahib's case makes an interesting study. He is a European and a member of the ruling class. But in his mission to study the culture of *sattra*, he becomes a subaltern. He is referred to as a *mlecha*- a low caste in the *sattra* and the locales do not understand his liberal humanism. His purity of mind and soul is questioned when he is discovered in his hut with Giribala and is banished from the place.

Both Indranath and Mark Sahib show that the centre- margin binary is not fixed in case of the subalterns. One who fails to internalize and practice the principles of the

dominant group is a subaltern. Mark sahib, a powerful European becomes a subaltern when he comes to the *sattrā* without the discourses of the ruling class. Indranath is a subaltern because he feels the discourses of his class futile and does not exercise them.

Rakesh is an isolated character in the novel *Nilakanthi Braja* and he never intends to belong to the community of the *Braja*. The strong religious discourses of *Braja* do not influence his life. But at the same time no one understands him and his philosophy and paintings have no takers. So this isolation makes him a subaltern. As a physician, Roy Choudhury is respected all over *Braja*. Because he follows the religious and social discourses, he brings his daughter Saudamini to *Braja*. But when she calls him a hypocrite, he sees himself failing as a father. Again when he brings the Christian lover to his daughter's life, she, rather than accepting him, decides to commit suicide. Thus both the missions of Mr. Roy Choudhury fail- he can neither make society happy by forcing his daughter to follow the social diktat like Sinhadatta does in the novel *Chinnamastār Mānuhto*, nor he can please his daughter . Thus in his failure to become a member of the patriarchy and belong to his daughter, he becomes a subaltern.

When these subalterns are compared with the character of *Jatadhari* from the novel *Chinnamastār Mānuhto*, the difference becomes clear. *Jatadhari* is an ascetic and with his spiritual power he belongs to the powerful group. But by opposing the ritual of blood sacrifice in the Kamakhya Temple, he rejects the membership of the dominant group. Despite strong opposition from the dominant group of the priests and their blind followers, *Jatadhari*, with a strong number of followers, succeeds in forming his own community. Moreover, the novel ends with a hint that *Jatadhari*'s sacrifice will be a harbinger of positive change. With his conviction and strong personality, *Jatadhari*

stands as a sharp contrast to all the subalterns in the novels of Mamani Raisom Goswami.

Shivanna from the novel *Chenābar Sōt* is another strong character who brings a minor change with his protest. He is stoic and has leadership quality. But the way he prepares to leave with Sonie in the end of the novel in search of a new avenue questions his leadership quality. Though he has carved niche for himself through the tough course of his life, he lacks a mission. The way he runs away from responsibility after marrying Sonie and his preparation in the end of the novel proves that he is an escapist.

Spivak's question 'Can the subaltern speak?' becomes more relevant when the minor characters of Mamani Raisom Goswami are taken into account. While the protagonists occupy the centre in the novels, these minor characters occupy the periphery and often appear in groups. They serve as the choric voice in the novel informing the readers about a lot of related happenings. They never create discourses, but they always internalize the discourses of the dominant class and play a role in implementing them. The women spying for signs of menstruation of unmarried girls in the novel *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā*, the *Radheswamis* in *Nilakanthi Braja*, the labourers in *Chenābar Sōt*, *Ahira* and *Māmare Dharā Tarowāl* and the devotees who believe in the ritual of blood sacrifice in *Chinnamastār Mānuhto* are the postcolonial subaltern subjects whose subjectivities have been denied. Their silent presence in the novels of Mamani Raisom Goswami certainly hints at their subalternity. Whereas the subaltern protagonists Saudamini and Giribala are literate, these minor characters are illiterate. Ajay Skaria is of the opinion that most of the subaltern groups consider writing as a dominant weapon used against them by the powerful. He writes,

*In social sciences, some truisms surround our received wisdom about how non-literate communities perceive writing. The most pervasive, possibly, is that these communities see it as magical.*⁴⁵

Terming the non literate society as oral society, Skaria further writes,

*...the oral mind is additive rather than subordinative, aggregative rather than analytic, redundant or copious rather than sparse, traditionalist rather than innovative, closer to lived experience rather than divorced from it, empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced, and situational rather than abstract.*⁴⁶

This observation points to the cause of the behavior of Mamani Raisom Goswami's subalterns. Patriarchy is a tradition with them and to defy it is innovative, something they do not support. In the three novels dealing with labourers, the novelist describes the working class as sympathetic, though in difficult living conditions they fight amongst themselves. When the situation demands they help one another, especially in case of tragedy.

Three of the six selected novels for the study namely- *Chenābar Sōt*, *Ahiraṇ* and *Māmāre Dharā Tarowāl* deal with the problems of poor labourers of construction companies in three different places- Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Like the settings, the times are also different. However, there is no change in the sufferings of the poor labourers and the exploitation of the company owners.

Chenābar Sōt is the first novel by the novelist. The conflict between the company owners and labourers is not very strong and the reason is the labourers are presented as

⁴⁵Skaria, Ajay. *Writing, Orality and Power in the Dangs, Western India, 1800s-1920s* in Amin Shahid and Dipesh Chakrabarty (ed) *Subaltern Studies IX*, p-14

⁴⁶Amin Shahid and Dipesh Chakrabarty (ed) . *Opcit*, p-16

meeek characters that have not learnt to protest against the atrocities of the owners. In *Ahiran* the protest mode of the labourers is stronger and *Māmare Dharā Tarowāl* the labourers gather courage to go on strike demanding fulfillment of their legitimate demands. Mamani Raisom Goswami has stated that while writing her first novel *Chenābar Sōt* the labour union did not exist. Labourers had been exploited by the company owners beyond limits. They did not know even to protest against the atrocities of the powerful owners. Most of the times, silence had been the reaction of the labourers even at the time of horrible accidents at work place, though most of the accidents occurred due to the negligence of the authority. The labourers were used as torn shoes by the company management. In 1974, during the time of writing *Ahiran*, the situation changed and labour union was formed to fight for the rights of the labourers. In 1976 the novelist started writing *Māmare Dharā Tarowāl* and labour union was stronger. As shown in the novel, the powerful union even called for a strike. Even though the strike was a disaster, the power of labour organization was realized by all concerned.⁴⁷ Thus these three novels trace the gradual rise of power of the labourers.

This view of the novelist regarding the formation of Labour union to empower labourers finds proper reflection in these three novels. In the novel *Chenābar Sōt* Sonie is happy to hear that an organization would be formed soon. But old Ramveer believes that strike is futile in companies and company people will continue to treat labourers as ‘torn shoes’. So long there is surplus of labour owners will dictate terms. Shivanna, a labourer, demands a logical compensation for dead Sadashiva and he is appreciated by other labourers because for the first time a labourer has demanded something from the

⁴⁷ See Gogoi, Hridayananda. Opcit,p-245

company. But this voice of protest soon diminishes due to selfishness of Shivanna in the end of the novel.

In *Ahiraṇ* the conflict between the labourers and company is stronger because by this time labourers have learnt to raise their voice of protest. When Ajij Miyan reached Ahiraṇ he felt that a strike would soon take place. the labour union was preparing the workers for the strike. The writings ‘Stones shall answer bricks’ could be seen every where.

The labourers are enraged by the fact that rate of payment differ from place to place. They lock horn with the company demanding payment at the rate of three rupees and fifty paise a day. The positive impact of the labour Union on the lives of the labourers is visible and even without a strike they make their protest heard as the company agreed to pay three rupees.

The main focus of the novel *Māmāre Dharā Tarowāl* is the strike of the labourers. Though the strike fails due to various reasons, the much talked about strike ultimately takes place in the novel. This journey from *Chenābar Sōt* to *Māmāre Dharā Tarowāl* shows the growth of the strength of the labourers to protest. If the labourers in *Chenābar Sōt* are meek subalterns, a closer study reveals that the labourers in the other two novels are also subalterns. Though some of these labourers have learnt to speak, their voices are not often heard. In *Ahiraṇ*, there is mention of how the labour contractors earn taking advantage of famine struck poor. Joseph tells Ajij Miyan how the labour contractors and brokers exploit the famine struck people from Chattisgarh. Rather than fighting for the cause the labourers, the labour union also try to earn benefit from the poor labourers.

Referring to the workers of the *bidi* factory Joseph further tells Ajj Miyan that the owners of factory exploit the labourers too much violating the Factory Act. The owners bribe the officials to protect their interest.

This violation of the Factory Act to exploit the poor labourers is a common tactic used by the owners. Labour contractors like Ujagar Singh form nexus with the company officials to earn more. In *Māmare Dharā Tarowāl*, local leaders like Shastri are held responsible for the failure of the strike. They betray the workers' trust for their personal benefit. Thus more than empowering the labourers, the labour union has formed a powerful group who are equivalent to the dominant local group in the power structure in addition to the already existing group of the owners and company officials that can be termed as the dominant group at the national level as mentioned by Ranajit Guha. This new group further exploits the labourers and makes them subaltern by their failed effort to represent the unheard voice and by robbing the poor of their trust in a unified effort.

Rise of Communism has been mentioned in these three novels and in a more elaborate way in *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā*. The labourers unite under the red flags to fight for their rights. In the novel *Ahira* Joseph informs Miyan that he has seen women labourers of the factory marching with red flags in their hand demanding justice.

Likewise in *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā Gosainee*, Indranath's mother, was scared because communists were becoming powerful in the periphery of the *sattra*. On few occasions, the poor farmers, under the influence of communists had beaten the mohura of the Gossain when he went there to collect taxes. They even threatened to capture the land of the Gossains if the latter did not plough their lands themselves. This was shocking to the Gossainee.

In the end of the novel Indranath is killed by a group of misguided farmers at the instigation of a local communist leader. These farmers for years have been loyal to their land owners and have paid them their due share of crops with utmost reverence. The Gossains were at the centre of power and the peasants were the 'other' living in the periphery. In his essay *Rebellious Hillmen: The Gudem-Rampa Risings 1839-1924*, David Arnold has stated that division among the natives is a characteristic of subalternity. He writes,

*for much of their lives the poorer villagers paid their lords the taxes and fees, the respect, the deference, and the social obligations, that -were customary or necessary for survival. In return, hopefully, they received protection, help and security. But this relationship did not reduce the peasants to mute and unquestioning obedience, nor did it rob them of the capacity for initiative and self expression.*⁴⁸

Communism gives the subaltern farmers a platform to be united. But the poor farmers do not speak for themselves; rather someone else tries to give them the voice. That is why the organizations and unions rather than empowering the weaker section, end up producing a new kind of leaders, who later exploit the disempowered section as is evident in case of the labour union in the novel *Māmare Dharā Tarowāl*.

The Communist leader in *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā* confesses in the end that nothing has changed for the poor farmers even after thirty years of killing Indranath and their bellies are still empty. Thus Communism fails to uplift the condition of these subalterns because the company labourers in the three novels and the farmers in *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā* are never part of the Communist party. They see Communism

⁴⁸Arnold,David. *Rebellious Hillmen: The Gudem-Rampa Risings 1839-1924*, in GuhaRanjit (ed) *Subaltern Studies I*,2008,p-90

as a platform that will voice their protest, rather than they voicing for themselves. Thus a failure at the representation of voice of the subaltern is seen in all these novels. Moreover, these incidents also drive home the fact that hungry and ignorant people can easily be misled.

Spivak defines subaltern as a class who remain disempowered even after political freedom of the country. Many characters in Mamani Raisom Goswami's novels fulfill this criterion of the subaltern. The story of the novel *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā* opens in the year 1948, one year after political independence of India. But most of the characters are not even aware of the transformation of power to the native Indians. The farmers, opium eaters, village women and other characters that appear as groups in the novel are deprived of the benefits of political Independence. Amongst the prominent individual characters, there is Giribala for whom political Independence means nothing. Indranath told Mark Sahib that he wanted to send Giribala to school. But his parents were opposed to his view because it was below the dignity of a girl from Gossian household to go to school. Since Giribala was a widow it was indeed a sin for her step out of the household.

Giribala's education is mentioned on another occasion and this time by a priest, an influential member of the society. He commented that as a child Giribala was taught at her home by a teacher. In a short time she learnt Dhruva Charit by heart showing sign of great intelligence. But such intelligence was of no use for a girl. The priest believed that Giribala's education would only bring bad name for her family.

Most of the villagers are not even aware of country's freedom from British colonialism. One of the maids of *Saru Gossainee* still believed that Queen Victoria rule *Bharat Desh*.

Saru Gossainee explained to her that The Queen had died long ago and British left India to be ruled by native people.

Shivanna in the novel *Chenābar Sōt* experiences the same. All the promises made by the political leaders about happy days after Independence prove futile for the poor labourers. They do not see any difference between the Britishers and native political leaders. Again a parallel is drawn between the company officials and political leaders because both exploit the poor. In *Ahiraṇ*, Ajjī Miyaṇ is a perfect example of how Independence, rather than empowering, has robbed a section of their freedom. As a result of partition that came along with Indian independence Ajjī Miyaṇ is made a refugee in his own homeland, a label he carries till his death.

Exploitation of women, especially widows, in Indian society forms the theme of her two major novels- *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā* and *Nilakanthi Braja*. Although women issue find place in all her novels, in these two novels it appears as the core issue. Patriarchy uses different discourses to subjugate women. Customs and traditions deprive the women of their right to live a normal life. Rules for men are different from that of women and there is always an alternative and less rigorous provision for men, especially the powerful ones. Widowhood, puberty, duties towards the husband and family, observance of rigorous religious rules are the devices used by the patriarchy to dominate the fair sex. When Giribala is brought back to her father's home after the death of her husband, her mother Gosainee tells some village women about Giribala's and her own opposition to Giribala's marriage because the groom is a known profligate. But despite knowing this, Giribala is given in marriage because she is about to attain puberty and attainment of puberty by a Brahmin girl before marriage will make this powerful family outcaste. Gossainee blames the village women for the widowhood

of Giribala because the village women spied on Giribala to know whether she had attained puberty. Because of the pressure created by these spying women Giribala was given in marriage to an ailing profligate who was much older than her. The husband died soon after marriage and as a result Giribala is now compelled to lead the life of a widow. This dead line of puberty drawn by the patriarchy also ruins the life of Bidhibala in the novel *Chinnamastār Mānuhto*.

The poor village women are machinery of the patriarchy through which the powerful male dominates the society. By creating epistemic violence of created knowledge, patriarchy first forces the weaker section to internalize their discourses and then use this section to implement these discourses to serve their purpose. In the name of customs and rituals also women are dominated. *Amoti*, the menstruation of Mother Earth, is full of oppressive rules for widows. Durga in *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā* is terrified at the very thought of *Amoti*. Moreover, she takes a bath to purify herself when the shadow of Mark Sahib falls on her, the latter being an outcaste. Because of their close adherence to such customs their health deteriorates and they look like ghosts. Even at the Temple of Goddess Kamakhya women are the greatest victims of religious rituals and discourses. The novelist narrates how a drunken husband behaves his wife when she attends the prayer session at *Jatadhari's* place. The woman goes to *Jatadhari* seeking solace. Her husband belongs to the group that supports animal sacrifice. When he finds her sitting in *Jatadhari's* place he grabs her by hair and drags her. He abuses her for stepping out of the house ignoring her domestic works. He also calls *Jatadhari* the kidnaper of Dorothy. Moreover, the rape attempt on Dorothy and Singhadatta's logic supporting Bidhibala's marriage to an already married man show that the patriarchy always dominates the womenfolk.

Then there is the effort of patriarchy to give the subalterns a homogenous identity. Giribala is advised by her father to follow the path of Durga because both are Gossain's widows. Their age difference, span and happiness of their conjugal lives and the characters of their husbands are never considered. Likewise, Saudamini's parents expect her to lead a life like the *radheswamis*. Because both these characters protest against the stereotyping, society has not been kind to them.

Though her main focus is always on women and the effort of patriarchy in 'othering' these women, Mamani Raisom Goswami has created certain male characters who are subalterns. Ramveer and Sadashiva in *Chenābar Sōt* Harsul and Ajij Miyan in *Ahiraan* and Indranath and Mark Sahib in *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā*, Roy Choudhury and Rakesh in *Nilakanthi Braja* are subalterns who are denied a space amongst the powerful. Ramveer and Sadashiva are two labourers who are exploited by the owners and they do not have the courage to protest against their oppressor. They mutely follow the legacy of their forefathers in their obeisance to authority. Ajij Miyan is rendered homeless by the partition of the country. The betrayal by his friend Joseph and the duty entrusted upon him by his mother to construct a *maqbara* in her name make him a subaltern. Like Harsul, Miyan also lacks a sense of belongingness. Harsul is a subaltern because he fails to belong to his community and the company takes his faithful service for granted. Indranath does not exercise his authority. The constant conflict in his mind between liberal thought and strong customs and the ultimate victory of customs in all the steps he has taken make him a subaltern. Mark sahib is a subaltern because amidst the locals, he is lonely. He cannot save Giribala from her tragedy and is ultimately banished from the village for no fault of his. Several other male characters in the

selected novels can be treated as subalterns, but they appear as class rather than individuals like the frenzied devotees of Maa Kamakhya in *Chinnamastār Mānuhto*.

The characters that live in the periphery in the novels selected for this dissertation, leaving the centre to the protagonists to make protest and try to change their lives, often appear in her novels as class rather than as individual and they are denied speech by the society in which they live, by the family of which they are members and by the hegemony of the discourses of the dominant class. These are the subaltern subjects whose subjectivities have been denied and every words uttered by them fail to reach the dialogic level where it can initiate a change. The *radheswamis* and lepers living in holy Brindaban in *Nilakanhti Braja*, the village women, opium addicted people and the poor farmers in *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā*, the poor helpless labourers in *Chenābar Sōt Ahiran* and *Māmare Dharā Tarowāl* and the frenzied devotees who believe in animal sacrifice, the prostitutes and the wives of the powerful priests in *Chinnamastār Mānuhto* belong to this group. These are the subalterns who have been denied a voice of protest by the society and also by the author.

The effort to study the subalterns as the product of domination by the powerful is challenged by certain exceptions found in the novels of Mamani Raisom Goswami. It has been observed that at times the powerless subalterns exercise power over the dominant group. For example, in the novel *Chinnamastār Mānuhto*, Singhadatta curses Ratnadhar, accusing him of eying his daughter and releasing buffaloes brought for sacrifice. His mother Bishnupriya couldn't tolerate this accusation and shouts at Sinhadatta. Swering by the goddess she starts cursing him.

Singhadatta's mother interferes and stops her from cursing her son. Religious discourse has given this weak woman the power to curse. Though her life as the wife of a priest is full of drudgery, others believe that her wrath can cause destruction. What Bishnupriya says is shocking because for the priests the pilgrims are the patrons and Singhadatta is an affluent person who regularly offers sacrifice at the Maa's altar. The pilgrims are never harshly treated. Moreover, she is a meek character who hardly speaks. But even a dominating male like Singhadatta is afraid of her of her curse.

Another example is that of the prostitutes mentioned in the novel. One devotee narrated how King Vishambar of the Chaitra dynasty attained salvation by worshipping the dark daughter of a prostitute. It is mentioned in *Yogini Tantra* that virgins worshipped in India are imbued with a celestial light. Prostitutes are looked upon with contempt in society and mixing up with this class invariably earns a bad reputation. But religious discourses have made them important. On one occasion Ratnadhar tells Dambaru that dust from a prostitute's doorstep is one of the five essential ingredients for Durga Puja. Again during Kumari puja young girls from brothels who have not attained puberty are worshipped.

Though the male folk dominate women, they worship Mother Kamakhya in her different manifestations for protection and prosperity. The novelist narrates how *Jatadhari* worships Maa Kamakhya for the protection of the entire body.

Michel Foucault's bottom up concept of power gives an answer to all such exception encountered in the selected novels. The power problem has been the focus of most of the works of Michel Foucault. This famous philosopher has investigated into the root of this problem from a historical viewpoint. Through deep analysis, Foucault has shown

how various institutions exercise their power on groups and individuals and how the latter affirm their own identity and resistance to the effects of power. Louis Althusser, a Marxist thinker, believes that power acts from top downwards. Contrary to this view, Foucault opines that power relations work through all the relational structures of the society and rather than being one way traffic, it works down top wards also. He strongly holds the view that institution does not possess power and power is not just repression and censorship. He asks this important rhetorical question,

*If power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe that we should manage to obey it?*⁴⁹

Patriarchy has attached a power to the dominated class as a motivating factor. This is the reason why Gossianee in *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā*, despite all the oppressive rules imposed upon the women of Adhikar's family takes pride in her status as she says that the respect of the women of a Gossain's family is hard earned and worthy of Gods. The implied meaning is that to earn respect a woman from Gossain family must observe the rules strictly.

In all the novels discussed, it has been observed that the voice of protest is stronger in women characters than the male characters. Foucault believes that where there is power there is resistance and the power relations between individuals cannot be reduced to master-slave or oppress–victim relations, but they are productive relations, because they imply resistance –without which no power relation can be conceived.⁵⁰ If there is power, there is always someone to resist it. Apart from the oppression of other dominant groups in power structure, women are invariably dominated by patriarchy. As such

⁴⁹Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*. 1978,p-36

⁵⁰See Kelley, Mark G.E. *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault*, pp-37-38

women become the doubly dominated group. The life of a Brahmin widow and the life of an untouchable woman could both be representations of subjugated existence in the novels of Mamani Raisom Goswami .In her novels the most important feature of women characters is silence. Whether it is the forced silence of a poor *radheswami*, wives of powerful Gossains and priests or that of a labourer woman, silence is present in many forms and often there is a desire to break this silence. Characters like Saudamini and Giribala that try to break the silence and protest against oppression perish. Other like Shashi who agrees to bear the oppression silently survives. For the women, silence and willingness to compromise with the situation become the strategy for mere survival. But whether they perish by protesting or survive by remaining silent, these women characters are gendered subalterns.