



RECLAIMING THE MARGINS IN MAMONI RAISOM GOSWAMI'S *THENG PHAKHRI* *TAHSILDARAR TAMAR TAROWAL*

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Abstract: Mamoni Raisom Goswami, is one of the most powerful writers in the history of modern Assamese literature. The Jnanpeeth awardee's latest novel *Theng Phakhri Tahsildarar Tamar Tarowal* deals with the life and activities of the unsung historical figure of Theng Phakhri who was the first woman Tahsildar or Revenue Collector under the British Imperial Regime. The British officers used the extraordinary talent of Theng Phakhri to further their colonial projects while extolling her silence. In this paper attempt has been made to understand and analyse the factors behind the silence of Theng Phakhri. Although she was an instrument of the colonial project, ultimately she abandons her silence and raises her voice against the colonisers when she relinquishes her official status and joins the native resistance group. The paper tries to show that while the writer appears to have little problem with the colonisation of her native people, deep in her heart she resented the colonisation project of the British which is evident in the voicing of a marginalised widowed tribal woman Theng Phakhri.

Index Terms- Mamoni Raisom Goswami, *Theng Phakhri Tahsildarar Tamar Tarowal*, Marginality

Introduction

Mamoni Raisom Goswami, a Jnanpeeth awardee writer of Assam has always caught the attention of readers and critics alike through her works. Her writings like *Neelakanthi Braja*, *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda*, *Chinnamastar Manuhto* etc. are noted not only for their literary value but also because of the fact that through these works she endeavoured to structure social changes and to focus the attention of the readers on the poor, downtrodden and marginalized section of the society. Mamoni Raisom Goswami's latest novel *Theng Phakhri Tahsildarar Tamar Tarowal* is another attempt in this direction where the novelist has endeavoured to bring the life and activities of the little-known historical figure of Theng Phakhri to light. This novel also highlights the colonial project of the British to subjugate and marginalise the natives and utilise their services for their own interest. The novelist has successfully brought out the complexities in the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised and critiqued the colonial projects of the British from the point of view of the marginalised.

The Silence of the Marginalised

As a consequence of the Burmese invasion and the ensuing acts of barbarism committed by the Burmese army, the *paiks* of the Ahom kingdom had scattered all over the place rendering the earlier system of tax-collection totally ineffective. Therefore, the British government who took over the administrative duty of the region after the Yandaboo Treaty of 1826, thought it prudent to introduce a new method of tax-collection which was based not on a personal but on a territorial basis. Under the new system, the whole area of a district was divided into blocks called *mouzas* or *mahals*, and the responsibility of realizing tax from all resident persons of a given *mouza* was entrusted to an officer in charge of it who was variously known as *mouzadar*, *bishaya*, *choudhury*, *kagoti*, *patgiri*. One important official in the whole system of tax collection was that of a *tahsildar* who was entrusted with the duty of collecting tax from a number of *mouzas* or a part of the district that was far larger than a *mouza*.

Mamoni Raisom Goswami's latest novel *Theng Phakhri Tahsildarar Tamar Tarowal* (2009) tries to bring to light the character of such a *tahsildar* from the Bijni area of lower Assam. The character is Theng Phakhri who was the first tahsildar or Revenue Collector of British Imperial India. However, what is more important is that she was a woman and her elevation to the rank of a tahsildar speaks volumes about her unique personality. The British officers used the extraordinary talent of Theng Phakhri to further their colonial projects while extolling her silence. In this paper attempt has been made to understand and analyse the factors behind the silence of Theng Phakhri.

The main factor behind Theng Phakhri's silence appears to be her subaltern status. In this novel we find all the members of the subaltern group to be silent. The protagonist of the novel Theng Phakhri, is also a member of the subaltern. From the very beginning of the novel we find silence to be a noticeable aspect of her character. She never lets others know about the storm inside her heart (Goswami, 2009, p. 2). Although her beauty and personality fascinate everyone, she hardly speaks. Throughout the day she speaks only one or two words (Goswami, 2009, p. 2). And her silence was not confined to her personal life only, it also extended to her professional life. One day during the initial period of her life as a Tahsildar, her footmen had ripped apart the body of a poor *raiya* (tenant farmer). But Theng Phakhri did not utter a word to protest this cruel act. And her silence was expectedly lauded by her colonial master Maccleansons Sahib, "Theng Phakhri you are great." (Goswami, 2009, p. 3) Even when her favourite uncle Mushahari died under mysterious circumstances, she maintained a stoic silence. There was every reason to believe that Mushahari was killed by the bullet fired by the British soldiers, but Theng Phakhri preferred to remain silent. It is not that only she had remained silent. She also advised the young boys who had gone to visit the barrack of the Company to maintain silence and not to speak audibly. The same silence was also seen when her party went to the house of Bhola Kachari, the oldest peasant of the village, to attach his goods and properties. She did not break her silence when her party of barkandaj seized everything that Bhola Kachari had without caring about his age or the severe illness of his son. However, it is difficult to infer from the text that her silence was a mode of protest against the imperial regime or its inhuman treatment of the natives.

Theng Phakhri was first appointed as Izaradar (Lessee) and then promoted as the Tahsildar (Revenue Collector). It may appear that her appointment in these posts gave this member of the subaltern an identity of her own. But the process of her acquiring an identity betrays her own helplessness. She was appointed as an Izaradar through a process over which she had no control. The British officials came to her home and handed over the *sanad* appointing her as the Izaradar of the three river ports of Manah, Sonkosh and Burhidiya. However, her subaltern status becomes clear throughout the development of the plot as she has little or no voice. She remains a mute spectator in the face of most events and incidents and her silence was the result of the pressure exerted upon her by the structure of colonialism. In fact, her appointment was an attempt by the colonial regime to co-opt a native in its structure for the better and smoother running of its administration. The novelist seems to project the character of Theng Phakhri to justify the observation that the subalterns always remain the subjects of others' representations, lacking a voice in which to articulate themselves (Nayar, 2015, p. 145).

Another probable cause of Theng Phakhri's silence may be her dependence on her colonial masters to forge an identity of her own. In the novel she seems to suffer from what Octavio Mannoni calls "dependency complex" (Mannoni, 1956, p. 41) when she feels being abandoned by the colonial father figures of Captain Hardy and Maccleansons. At the very beginning of the novel the novelist suggests that Theng Phakhri had been waiting regularly by the river side for the arrival of Captain Hardy on a steamer. She could not even muster the courage to imagine what would happen to her in case Captain Hardy did not arrive. When Captain Hardy passed away on his way back to England, she replaced him with another white master Maccleansons in that

role. She depended on Macleanon heavily and the novel relates how she followed his orders to the tee (Goswami, 2009, p. 41).

Reclaiming the Margins and the Rise of the Nationalist Discourse

Even though the novelist has repeatedly highlighted the silence of the marginalized natives, including Theng Phakhri's, gradually the plot reaches another phase where we see the subaltern characters begin to shun their silence and attempt to wrench agency for their own actions. While the first part of the novel is mainly about the British colonial regime, its civilizing mission and the mimicry of the natives, the latter half of the novel is about the assessment of the colonial rule by the marginalised natives. This newfound agency and voice of the subalterns led to the rise of the nationalist discourse that resisted colonialism. The voice of the marginalized was increasingly becoming powerful and the nationalist discourse began to appear in different forms. In the novel we find how the son of Ujir Singh had sacrificed his own life resisting the colonial regime in Uttar Pradesh. Interestingly, Ujir Singh's son was a soldier working in the British Imperial Army. This nationalist discourse of resistance gradually became active in Darrang and Bijni of Assam. The novel tells us that the young boys of Assam had used indigenous methods to produce sulphur and carbonate of potash (Goswami, 2009, p. 40). The rebels also looted the treasury of the Goalpara district killing two footmen and two sepoys. The leader of these nationalist forces was a certain prince who had been successful in uniting many young men from Baladi, Panbari to Ranikhata. He even came to meet Theng Phakhri before he was arrested by the colonial army and sent to the gallows.

Although Theng Phakhri was quite intelligent, she had failed to realize the truth behind the unusual trust that the British had placed on her. It was her maternal uncle, Mushahari, who was able to make her see the truth (Goswami, 2009, p. 36). When she heard the words of her uncle, she realized that it was time to resist the colonial discourse and contribute to the nationalist resistance movement. When her maternal uncle was "accidentally shot" by the Company soldiers, she found it hard to digest. Shunning her silence, she goes to meet Macleanon Sahib to ask how her Mushahari Uncle got killed. This is the first instance in the novel of Theng Phakhri voicing her thoughts and emotions. Although she is the protagonist of this historical novel, she is not the first marginalized character to be given a voice. In fact, it was her fellow marginalized people, who belonged to the lower strata of the society, who were the first to voice their discontent against the Company rule. These uneducated marginalized people were the first to accuse the Company soldiers of murdering Mushahari. Thus, the novelist has shown that the voicing of Theng Phakhri was possible only because of the poor marginalized natives many of whom were also active members of the nationalist resistance against colonialism.

Conclusion

Thus, we find that Mamoni Raisom Goswami has highlighted how the marginalized people of Bijni area wrested agency from the colonial powers. By giving voice to the marginalized, Goswami has once again proved how she always stood by the poor and downtrodden section of the society. What is notable in *Theng Phakhri Tahsildar Tamar Tarawal* is that it was the common people whose voice was heard first. Theng Phakhri, although she was placed in a comparatively better position, took her time to raise her voice against the colonial project and join the nationalistic resistance. As the novelist has pointed out she was torn between her nationalistic urges and her loyalty for the British (Goswami, 2009, pp. 36,51) for a long time before she decided to sever all her ties with the Company and set sail with a resistance group to fight for her motherland against the colonisers. The voice of the marginalised people like Mushahari, Ramchandra, Khargeshwar Sutradhar proved to be more powerful and influential than those of the Britishers like Hardy, Macleanon or Nathan Clarke. It was the voice of the marginalised that encouraged thousands of other marginalised to raise their voice demanding the full agency to run their own country.

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