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Position of Woman and Patriarchy in Homen Bargohain's Novel "Subala"

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Abstract

Patriarchy is the dominant code ascertaining the woman's position. Women in patriarchy are placed in a marginalized position and each woman has common experience as an oppressive and exploitative creature of a gender biased society. In every society women are behaved and considered as an object, inferior to men and are deprived of equal power and position. Men are the decision makers who debate on virtues and vices of women and speak on the purity of a woman as chaste or unchaste. Societal honour of a community is related to a woman's purity. The men are the subjects and superior sections of the society who determine the destiny of a woman by imposing various restrictions and repressions. Her sexuality is an important issue of discussion for man and any deviance by her is condemned. The main factor of women's oppression is male control of a woman's sexuality where patriarchal society plays a dominating role in sexual relations. Patriarchal society shows gender biasness in our society by expecting woman to be feminine with the qualities of mild, chaste, gentle, pure, dutiful, obedient, confined and private. But the same society expects men to be dominant, virile, controlling and decisive. Men belong to public sphere and women belong to the private sphere. So, in our society masculine agency controls female sexuality. Women are not considered equal with men but kept as wives and mistresses to satisfy their desires. A woman is judged as pure if she stays within the four walls of a home. But for a man the outside world is permitted as normal. In a patriarchal society a woman loses her identity if she fails to manifest the feminine attributes in proper measure. In this paper I will deal with the novel *Subala* written by Homen Borgahain, an Assamese novelist of the post war period to examine the position of a woman in a patriarchal society accepting the fact that both the genders male and female play markedly different roles.

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Introduction

The Assamese society of the post war period was completely different from other parts of India. Assam was slow and lagged behind educationally and economically. This was due to the commercial interests of the British who formed the discerning middle class. The lack of educational facilities and economic backwardness prevents the development. During the nineteenth century the most debatable question was the role of woman and generally the idea of women's education was disfavoured and neglected by the common men. The society appreciated a virtuous housewife and considered marriage as the well settled goal for her. Women were kept away from career building and were expected to acquire skill of household works and 'queen it over the kitchen' (Saikia 179) Assamese novelists of the post war period portrayed the

realities of life, the miseries, consequences of the lower and middle class Assamese people. The existed economic and social inequalities reflect the mental and moral decay which make the society, an amalgamated mass of wretchedness. But the effect of changes, social and economic has no bearing on the mind of patriarchy and on the structure of patriarchal society that frames a woman's life in Assamese society. Such situations and consequences lead a woman to transgression in any society. The woman remains a vulnerable possession in patriarchal society and the rule makers are the men who exert their power in controlling all spheres in the life of a woman-emotional, material and physical. That overpowering patriarchal authority constructs a woman's fall and deprived her from the pleasures and securities of the wifely domain. In the novel *Subala* the protagonist Subala's fall and degrading

existence is motivated by such factors. She has bitter experiences of life that makes her vulnerable to exploitation. Feminist analysis has always regarded prostitution to be a deviant activity carried out under patriarchal oppression, (Barry 1988^[5]; Daorkin 1988; Hoigard and Finstad 1992) and recent trends have considered it to be a necessary socio economic response in a socially appropriated crime of male sexual supremacy (O' Neill 2001) Feminists have always believed that rather than promiscuity it is always inequality and sexism that is at the root of a woman's choice to become a prostitute. Thus double standard of sexual promiscuity has led feminists all over the world to adopt a gendered outlook towards this institution of buying and selling sex. Moreover, with increasing popularity of liberated sex in western countries, any critique of prostitution is considered by the feminist to be offensive and repressive (Carpenter 2000)^[3]. Women in a patriarchal society are always marginalised and they experience domination and exploitation as the 'other'. Whenever a woman starts to give precedence to her thoughts, feelings and natural desires she is criticised as a shameless woman and labelled her as a fallen woman. Such fallen women are never allowed to lead a normal and respectable life, but are presented as objects from which one always derives pleasure. Thus the patriarchal ideologies determine a woman's position in society. The idea of morality and deviance are social constructs to control a woman's sexuality. So Fallenness is a social construct and in literature a fallen woman is represented as the submersion of stereotypical image of Indian womanhood. All the writers write in the patterns of patriarchy and the qualities like morality and virtues are appreciated as women's property.

Analysis

Subala (1965) is a novel written by Homen Borgohain, a popular novelist of post war period. Through this critical writings he influences societal ideas. In contemporary Assamese literature, his novels are remarkable for naturalistic outlook and strong realism. In the present novel Subala the novelist Homen Borgohain depicts the life of a prostitute Subala very boldly. A vivid picture of repressive and hostile attitude of a patriarchal society towards the prostitute is portrayed in the novel. The novelist Borgohain narrates how the whole Subala spends a life of despair and agony to attain her present station. The novel Subala deals with the life of helpless poor Subala and her family. All the family members struggle a lot for survival. Subala has to overcome a series of events in her life, does hard labour to earn but all these factors decide eventually the course of Subala's life, where she ends up in a brothel to please customers with her young and beautiful body. Subala's struggle for survival and its terror has decided her fate. Subala initially starts to work with a feeling of disgust because her poverty compels her to do an extremely unpleasant work. But gradually her involvement starts to lessen her unpleasant feelings. In concluding part of the novel we find Subala's fear of rejection and this fear brings to her the memory of her secure days. So, this is the reality, the truth of life that every fallen woman faces in society. So, Subala is a victim of circumstances who had to spent sleepless nights because she was aware of her fate after death. She knows that she will be rejected as a prostitute. The widows also during that time had no control over their lives and their bodies were thrown out of the homes after their death. Subala as a prostitute and as a helpless poor widow was no exception either. Subala had one younger sister. After the death of her father Subala's mother could not bear the hunger

stricken faces of her daughters and goes to borrow some money from the village headman in exchange for her gold ring. But the village headman does not want to lend her money in exchange for her valuable gold ring but passes some lewd remarks. He shamelessly says that she still has a beautiful and attractive body to trade.

"I have told you earlier. I would not lend money without any surety. You still have something with you; if you give me that I will lend you money, more than ten rupees even (5:35)."

Thus the novelist depicts both Subala and her mother as victims of patriarchal injustice. When Subala's mother cries and begs for her daughters, the village headman does not feel pity for her daughters. He shows that all her pleas only irritate him. He retorts:

"I have not kept you waiting. On the contrary, you have come to me and waylaid me as I was going out. Don't think of fooling me with your tears. Why are you so distressed, thinking of your daughters' lives? You can give birth to more daughters if you wish. Quick! Answer me, do you need money or not? (5:35)"

The village headman's lewd comments shock her first. But she has not any other way to earn and feed her children. She goes to his house next morning and earn a hundred rupee note. Thus Subala's mother uses her body to keep her ailing daughters alive in desperate situations.

Like her mother Subala too experiences exploitations and mental agonies in a patriarchal society. The desperate circumstances that Subala faces in life compel her to enter in the trade of professional prostitution. Initially Subala runs away to escape her mother, who wants to sell her daughter's body. Subala's attractive physical beauty makes her a victim in the hand of the village hoodlum. So, Subala flees from her home in the fear of being seduced by him. After leaving home, she meets an old woman by chance and innocently trusts her. But unfortunately that old woman misleads her by introducing her to a new world of desire, lust and flesh. Thus the society compels Subala to perform sexual services where there is a constant demand by man. Subala decides to provide that by means of prostitution. In the narrative the author emphasises on the situations and surroundings of a society that contribute a lot to choose a woman's destiny by conspiring to become a prostitute. The society isolates her because she deviates the social conventions. She is deprived of the respectable and dignified existences like wife or daughter and she prepares herself to accept her profession as her destiny. Thus Subala's destiny is decided and controlled by the patriarchal society and she becomes a bed partner to the lecherous, lewd, decent, and young and the old alike. In the public eye Subala becomes a pollutant woman. The society creates moral values for woman but never concern about male. The author through the character Subala portrays a vivid picture of dilapidated condition of poverty and oppression and at the same time presents that by choosing a shameful life she has deprived herself from any further happiness in her life. She is a deviant woman who can never attain a happy and content conjugal life. She breaks the myth of feminine domesticity. Being a human being, Subala dreams to get a life partner. In the later part of the novel Kanti, a man comes to her life. He is a pimp who has a soft corner in his heart for Subala. He brings her home as his wife. But happiness comes to her life for a short while. Kanti after spending few days with her starts to use her as an earning machine and behaves her as a prostitute. He demands money and otherwise he abuses her mercilessly.

Throughout the novel, the author Bargohain narrates the myth of feminine domesticity through the character Subala who is deprived of conjugal happiness. Thus Subala is a victim of subjugation and physical and sexual oppression. She is used and thrown out by men. She wants to come out of her profession but her husband Kanti sends her back to prostitution. So Subala's silent submission in the novel symbolises male sexual domination and mastery and female subordination. Subala is presented just as an object who can be used and thrown out after fulfilling one's lust and biological appetite.

Subala's story reinforces feminist Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that a prostitute is a scapegoat and man vents his turpitude upon her and rejects her finally. 'A Caste of Shameless Women' allows the 'honest woman' to be treated with the most chivalrous respect..... whether she is put legally under police supervision or works illegally in secret, she is in any case treated as a pariah (Beauvoir, 569). According to Beauvoir, the position of a prostitute and married woman is same economically. Her assertion is that a wife is also a victim of oppression through marriage but she is respected in the society. On the other hand, a prostitute is denied the respect and right of a woman being 'sums up all the forms of feminine slavery at once (ibid)'. Subala's fallen status in the narrative is a social construct. She is the representative of the vulgar environment that prevalent in the interior places. She is presented as a woman incapable to lead a dignified life. Subala values a respectable life with a happy family but she is forced to accept a degrading and neglecting existence. The author here emphasises the fact that poverty often subjects human beings to inhuman conditions. The protagonist Subala is a victim of the repressive patriarchy and its sexual subjugations.

In Feminism and Prostitution the critic Maggie O' Neill claims that, "Different life circumstances, different experiences getting involved in exploitative relations with a man.... association with other workers....., coupled with desperate financial circumstances and a will to change the situation by any means can facilitate an entry into sex work." (O' Neill 76)

This condition echoes in Subala's life. Her degradation is impelled by desperate and unforgettable circumstances that she faces in her life. So situations conspire Subala's choice. So the economically and emotionally impoverished patriarchal society created the fallen woman Subala. Subala, the protagonist is an avid expression of the author's compassion towards the downtrodden and his sensitivity about the protagonist's incapacity to lead a dignified life as a human being. Subala's mother is ready to sell her daughter to Naren, a well-to-do villager but Subala tries to live a virtuous life. Her attempts to save herself infuriate her mother. She comes out with the bitter truths of her life.

"To live in this world money is indispensable but man cannot live by eating money. One needs money to buy rice and dal, to buy clothes. I have half a rupee with me and I go around the shops to buy some rice but nobody gives me any... Your idea of virtue, morals and right actions is also this useless coin. It doesn't fill hungry stomachs... Just as money may sometimes be of no use, virtue and ethics can also be worthless when people do not value them in the market. I have not read these things in books or heard from somebody. I have learned them from my own experiences in very painful situations..." (S 31-32)

In the life of Subala and her mother the critic O'Neill's argument is apparent. The narrative Subala echoes the

dreadful and unpleasant conditions of modern living and the author very vividly depicts the continued suffering of an abused soul. Subala is a creation of an economically deprived society, where sexual and social inequalities are heaped on women in the name of virtue, social respectability and honour. A woman faces ignominies when a man escapes it under similar circumstances.

Conclusion

Subala is considered a deviant character because she has independent sexuality. She transgresses the social and morale rules that control her sexuality and defies social structures of gender domination. Subala struggles against the power structures made by patriarchal society, but ultimately accepts the superiority of man. The author through the representation of the story of resistance and dominance tries to create a space for the neglected and marginalised women voices, who want to include themselves in the socio-cultural system as authentic individuals. The novel *Subala* mirrors a society where the position of women are changed from a subordinate and dependent, role to the gradual attainment of economic liberation, social security and recognition in relation to any man. There is no doubt that the woman like Subala in today's society is still enveloped with moral codes of virtue and modesty.

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