

Assamese fictions in translation such as *The Blue Necked God* (2012) by Mamoni Raisom Goswami (1942 - 2011), *The Hour Before Dawn* (2009) by Bhabendra Nath Saikia (1932-2003) and *Swarnalata* (1991) by Tilottoma Misra (1959-) are selected for this study. Its purpose is to explore and examine the images of women as portrayed in these novels. These particular authors have dealt with variegated panoramas of the Assamese society, culture, faith and everyday struggles of the people living in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. However, the present research has undertaken to bring to focus their social criticism, specifically relating to women's issues which appear as a common theme across their novels. It is a fact that each of the selected novels works out women's issues from different perspectives. But factors such as the changing age and identity politics impacting the novelists point to the literary movement like feminism and the new social consciousness that critique inequalities of gender. In a predominantly patriarchal society such as Assam, women are considered stereotypically submissive and docile. This dissertation makes an attempt to interrogate various female issues such as the widow remarriage, girls' education, child marriage, which are very predominant in the Assamese society and in the Indian context in general. The attitude of the male chauvinists towards the females and the manner by which women subvert the patriarchal order are the prime concerns of this dissertation.

Among the selected novelists Mamoni Raisom Goswami is an important figure in Assamese literature. She was born on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1942 in a Brahmin family. She was a poet, University Professor, writer, and social activist. Through her writings, she wanted to bring reforms in its cultural, political and moral life of the society. From a tender age, she used to write poems and published a collection of short stories in 1962 in the name of *Chinaki Morom*. She

wrote thirteen novels, seven short stories, nonfictions, and two autobiographies. She was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1982 and the Jnanpith Award (the highest national award of India for literature) in 2000. She had also done research on the *Ramayana*. Many of her novels voice against the injustices and inequities that crept into the Assamese society. Issues like domination of women, economic injustice, caste system, patriarchy, animal sacrifice are at the forefront of her literary preoccupations. For example, in the *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda* (1988) or *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tuskar*, Goswami exposes atrocities of the males against the females, particularly the young widows. For ages, the females have not been allowed to enter the *Manikut* (the place where the idols of Gods are placed), and the widows are being deprived of all societal engagements, as though they were responsible for the death of their husband (Kakoti 22). The *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda* is an important text on the widow's problem. The protagonist Giribala, a Brahmin widow, breaks the conventional tradition as she enters into love relationship with a missionary, named Mark. Hiren Gohain, an eminent critic and a socialist thinker of Assam remarks that through the *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda* Goswami tries to show the degradation of moral values of the Assamese Brahmin society (Gohain 10). *Sanskar* is one of her short stories where she vehemently reveals the atrocities and the hypocrisies of the orthodox Brahmin society. Born in a Brahmin family Goswami once said "I try to write from the direct experiences of my life. I only mould these experiences with my imagination" (Lal 72).

In *The Blue Necked God* (2012) (*Neelkanthi Braja* (1976) in original Assamese) which is a selected text for this study, she focuses on the condition of the widows in Hindu society. The novel *The Blue Necked God* reveals the darker side of Brindavan, most ancient holy place for the Hindus in Uttar Pradesh. According to the old customs, the Hindu widows were not allowed to remarry; so they were deprived of social and other opportunities of normal life and consequently

they had to go to Brindavan to earn spiritual merit for the rest of their life. In this context the holy city of Brindavan is known as a “city of widows” (Rai). The plight of widows and other women serving as *radheshyamis*<sup>1</sup> are one of the important issues of her novel which exposes their sexual exploitation. The title of the book is significant in the sense that in the Hindu mythology, Shiva drinks *Halahala*<sup>2</sup> to save the Gods and demons and the world and consequently his “throat becomes blue” and he is thus known as “Neelakantha” (Khanna). The Lord drank the poison that arose from the churning of the sea and controlled the destructions, which also establishes his power over death. Goswami works out this myth to signify an ironic social perspective on a widow who would face a corrupted environment and get swamped under its poison rather than becoming an agency heroically offering a solution. In other novels like *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda*, Goswami also critiques the nature of the Assamese *Satras*, the established institutions of *Vaishnavism*, because these sacred places promote some dogmatic standards to discriminate against women.

Among the selected novelists, Bhabendra Nath Saikia’s literary career is also markedly noted for his brilliant and passionate concerns for society. Saikia had his doctorate degree from the University of London in 1961 and later worked as a reader in the Department of Physics of Gauhati University. He was awarded the Sahitya Academy award (1976) and National Padma Shri (2001). He wrote twenty-nine books, excluding the Assamese journal *Prantik* and *Hafura*. He also worked on films like the *Sondhya Raag* (1977), the *Anirban* (1981), the *Agnisnaan* (1985), etc. His literary works revolved around the social realities of his times. He also worked on children’s literature. The *Moromor Deuta*, which was translated into English in 1998 as *Dear*

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<sup>1</sup> Canonically, *Radhe* means the milkmaids or the Gupis and *Swami* means Lord Krishna in Brindavan. The milkmaids sacrifice their life in serving Lord Krishna.

<sup>2</sup> the poison of the snake Vasuki which is produced in the churning of the ocean

*Father*, is the best example of this. In this novel, he portrays the sacred relationship between child and father. His novel *Antareep* which is translated as *The Hour Before Dawn* (2009) shows the dark side of the patriarchal society of Assam. As the story unfolds, the protagonist Menoka's husband married and brought home a girl from a nearby village without the consent of his first wife. After the second marriage, he paid no attention to Menoka. To take revenge on Mohikanta as well as to satisfy her mental and physical demands the first wife Menoka develops an extramarital affair with a lowcaste. Menoka, the only daughter of a deeply religious father, was brought up with traditional values. Menoka's father constantly hummed verses from religious scriptures. When he got to spend some time alone with his daughter, he used to tell stories of great feminine characters from mythology, such as Sita, Sabitri, and Damayanti (Saikia 126). Menoka's attitude was moulded to usually conform to the orthodox patriarchal norms. Of course Saikia does not deify Menoka, nor does he make her a victim asking for pity. She is not flawless, but portrayed with all her human qualities.

Tilottoma Misra too is a renowned author and critic in Assamese literature. Like other Assamese writers, she wants to bring reformation through her writings to the conservative Assamese society. Her book *Literature and Society in Assam: A Study of the Assamese Renaissance 1826-1926* (1987) gives a vivid description of orthodox Assamese society. In 2017 along with noted writer Mamang Dai she was awarded the Luminous Lummer Dai Literary Award for 2017. Her novel *Swarnalata* (1991) portrays a time when Assam was experiencing modernity in its literature. The novel speaks mainly on the issues of remarriage of widows, girl child education, and eradication of the caste system. Misra portrays Gunabhiram Barua as a true social reformer who initiated an institution in Assam under the influence of the *Brahmo Samaj* in the second half of the nineteenth century. Swarna the protagonist in the novel is Gunabhiram

Barua's daughter who fights for the remarriage of widows and female education. Swarna's father himself marries a widow and puts up an example to the conservative Assamese society. Swarna takes admission in a missionary school in spite of societal restrictions. Even after the death of her first husband, she marries another man. The whole novel is worked out, as it appears, from the woman's perspective and serves to question patriarchal customs.

From the above discussion, it becomes amply clear that the selected fictions critique conservative patriarchal orders. Keeping in view the age of feminist movements (1970s onwards) and general social consciousness about human equality and rights, it would not be wrong to hold that educated and sensitive writers in Assam are not unaffected by such events. Their fictions such as selected for this study come very close to feminist issues, though these are not written expressly from specific feminist perspectives.

The First Chapter of the dissertation "Introduction" highlights the emergence of Assamese literature and the rise of feminist interest in Assamese writers and their writings. During the colonial period in Assam, the Englishmen enlightened the innocent people with the new values and codes which are more unorthodox and liberal in nature. It was the Baptist Missionary Press, established in 1846 in the Sivasagar District in Assam, which circulated the first Assamese newspaper under the editorship of Dr. Nathan Brown. Though *Arunodoi* was published under the guidance of the Englishmen, there were many Assamese like Gunabhiram Borua, Hemchandra Borua and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan who contributed to the magazine with their liberal ideas which are different from the traditional and typical thoughts of the Assamese societies (Bora 186). This chapter introduces the authors of the selected texts and their literary works. Bhabendra Nath Saikia, Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Tilottoma Misra are well known literary figures particularly in Assamese society. Along with other writers in Assam,

Saikia, Goswami and Misra have been able to create awareness on females problems in Assamese society. Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *The Hour Before Dawn* portrays a typical post Independence Assamese society where women like Menoka with her bold actions subvert and challenge the patriarchal Assamese society. On the other hand, Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *The Blue Necked God* and Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata* deal with the depiction of the forlorn conditions of widows.

Among the other literary genres, novels play a vital role in the history of Assamese literature. Novels in Assam are also a literary phenomenon inspired by western influence. In 1880 the first Assamese novel was written by Padmavati Devi Phukanani in the name of *Sudharmar Upakhyan*, which got little publicity. Phukanani was followed by Hemchandra Baruah who wrote his first novel *Bahire Rang Cang Bhitore Kowa Bhatari* (playing in the parlour, empty is the larder) the main purpose of which was to eradicate the religious and social evils of that time. There were many writers like Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Padmanath Gohain Boruah, Navakanta Baruah who wrote many Assamese novels depicting the realities of Assamese society.

Assamese literature has evolved through many eras. Hema Saraswati in the thirteenth century who wrote the *Pahlad Charita* based on the *Vishnu Purana* can be recognised as the oldest Assamese writer (Bhushana 111). The mighty Ahom dynasty was maintaining the written records (*Buranjis*) of history for the future generation. They wrote down the *Buranjis* reflecting the socio-cultural traditions and values as well as the war skills of the indigenous Assamese people in the *sachi* leaves (Deka 1). The *Buranjis* of the *Chutias* and the *Kacharis* are the early examples of the *Buranjis* written during the Ahom rule. Furthermore, Srimanta Sankardeva and Mahapurush Madhabdeva (15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> Century) are two major contributors to the Assamese

literature with their numerous *Borgeet*<sup>3</sup>, and *Bhaona*<sup>4</sup>, and they influenced the people of Assam to live in harmony and love irrespective of caste, creed, class, and religion.

In the *Arunudo* era (1846-1870), Assamese literature reached the high level of production and standard with the introduction of new technologies and new ideas in the process of book and magazine printing. In Kolkata the Assamese students like Chandra Kumar Agarwala, Jyotiprasad Agarwala among others formed an organisation under the banner of *Asomiya Bhakha Unnoti Hadhini Sabha* (Society for the Development of the Assamese Language) which aimed to uplift the Assamese literature with the inclusion of new ideas and principles which are different from the old traditional norms of the society (Nath 59).

As is well known, the Indian society has undergone socio-cultural changes rapidly during and after the colonial era in India. Even after seven decades of Independence, many areas in the society remain untouched by modern scientific and democratic system, and especially the condition of women is a major area of concern even today. Writers Rajani Kanta Bordoloi, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Laskminath Bezboroa, and Nabakanka Barua were some of the predecessors who appeared early as conscious reformists and got also to inspire moral character development in the Assamese society. The selected writers here are of course motivated by social reformation, but almost the central focus in their writings is on women's issues. Among the three Assamese novels (in translation), two are written by women writers, while one is written by a male author. One relevant problem for the dissertation is to consider if different

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<sup>3</sup>Assamese devotional songs were composed by Srimanta Sankardeva and Mahapurukh Madhabdeva in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries

<sup>4</sup>One of Assamese traditional dramas which give strong message of mutual acceptance to the common folk. It is also started by Srimanta Sankardeva

patriarchal representations of women are in any way influenced by the author's gender consciousness, socio-economic status and value system. Further, this study intends to probe Goswami's awareness of women's plight in *Brindavan* (U.P) and other two novelists' concern with women's issues in Assam, and to explore if their female concerns are similar or not. Besides a few critical studies available in Assamese or English on these writers, not many critical discourses are found in English relating to these chosen texts. The dissertation tries to examine the issues relating to women, their education and widow marriage, as revealed in the selected texts with respect to the Hindu society in general and Assamese society in particular.

This chapter has brought briefly to view a broad historical perspective on the development of Assamese fiction. What makes Assamese literature more vibrant is its realistic presentation of the narrative, and depictions of the contemporary society with lucid language. Malaya Khaund, an Assamese critic and writer comments on the writing style of Indira Goswami's writings, "in her writings even dead characters are galvanised and come alive at the touch of her magical pen" (Khaund 71). There are many writers from the time of pre-Independence to the present era who have been narrating the social follies and shortcomings, for the peace loving nature of loving Assamese people. The numerous thoughts and ideas of the different Assamese authors irrespective of gender make an immense impact not only in Assam and its people, the impact is realisable outside Assam too.

As the present dissertation is focused on garnering images of women in select novels, it is useful to invoke in this chapter a few important examples in this respect. Among literary genres, the novel plays a vital role in the history of Assamese literature. In 1884 the first Assamese novel written by a woman writer named Padmavati Devi Phukanani was the *Sudharmar Upakhyani*, which depicted the values and norms of the Assamese society. Phukanani was followed by



Hemchandra Baruah who wrote his first novel *Bahire Rang Chang Bhitore Kowa Bhatari* (1885) (playing in the parlour, empty is the larder) the main theme of which was to eradicate the religious and social evils of that time. They were followed by writers such as Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Chandrakumar Agarwala, Padmanath Gohain Boruah, Navakanta Baruah, and Hemchandra Goswami, who wrote many Assamese novels which depicted the Assamese traditional values and principles (Goswami 46).

The Second Chapter “Critiquing the Patriarchal Society” has proposed to examine how patriarchal society treats women. It also analyses how the three primary texts *The Hour Before Dawn*, *The Blue Necked God* and *Swarnalata* resist patriarchy. Along with the selected texts the chapter includes some feminists’ texts drawn from various cultures of the world and Assamese texts in translation, which are put in a comparative framework. And the main characters are compared for exposing the social and customary attitude towards women. This chapter discusses how writers have questioned the nature of the patriarchy in different societies such as African, European, Indian and a number of esteemed feminist writers and thinkers to consider their critique of the societies to which they belong. The comparative frame is supposed to provide a critical focus on the specific nature of Assamese fiction on women’s issues.

It has been found that patriarchal structure, both in West and the East, shows characteristic attitudes and ideologies that oppress and marginalize women. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published her monumental work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, where she explores the inequalities in America between her mother and father, and observes the problems faced by women in general. The publication of Woolstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* set into motion a series of books that would begin to question women’s existence under the patriarchal setup. Virginia Woolf *A Room of One’s Own*, published in 1929,

would become one of the strong pillars of twentieth century feminism. From the basic question that swept the first wave feminism, Woolf moves on to a different level where she begins to question the intention of patriarchal codes and conducts in denying women a space of their own. The book argues passionately the women's need for space if they are to do something substantial. The book questions the representation of women in literature by their male counterparts, and how women characters in literature have perpetually been under the shadow of the male psyche, and what violence have been done unto them in the process. She discovers that males were in a position that allowed them to define the role of women in society, and their works reinforced what they thought on how a woman must best conduct herself. The book critiques the portrayal of women as "angel at home" that was so much characteristic of the Victorian era, whereby a woman was expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband, and as having no desire or wish of her own. Woolf points out in *A Room of One's Own* that the language of female writers is fundamentally different from their male counterparts. It therefore follows that a women writer would be more sensitive and more realistic in her portrayal of women characters, for she understands them better. These literary ideas still continue to inspire most feminist writings even today. The selected Assamese novels too seem to project some of these critical insights.

Feminist cultural studies, that emerged in the late 1970's, have been a subject of research not only for popularizing the gender studies, but also most importantly, for establishing gender as a mode to explore the cultural study in a broad way (Meagher 271). Stuart Hall, the cultural theorist and the sociologist defines feminism as an "interruption" that changes the practice of studying cultural studies (Escosteguy 63). In his autobiographical book *Minimal Slaves* (1993), he explains his migration experiences and the discovery of black identity in a multicultural

society. The feminist movement is also related to notion of multiculturalism which argues for the freedom struggles, and civil right movement (Ponzanesi 91). Cultural minorities also require some special rights which can strengthen their positions in societies. The special right is simply an attempt to go equal with the majority groups. However, such rights are not able to remove bias against women. On the other hand, Okin cites some examples of women's problems like polygamy, child marriage, *purdah* and divorce system in most patriarchal societies which have been happening in ironically due to the special rights of the groups (Ponzanesi 93). In *The Color Purple* (1982) Alice Walker has depicted the black patriarchy which is equally disrespectful of black women. Even in the white American society, as Tony Morrison presents, the Africans suffered from double-consciousness in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Even in postcolonial societies, feminists have drawn attention to the double colonization syndrome of women because of patriarchy and colonialism working in tandem. Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967) has exposed the colonizer's control of the colonized of Algeria (France), whereas in India early anti-colonialist struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi has had its worldwide inspiration. The point to stress here is that in most cases, societies colonial or postcolonial remain patriarchal in basic structure. Thus discrimination and exploitation have continued through ages, and women like children remained soft targets for repressive measures.

Gayatri spivak an eminent Indian feminist and postcolonial critic has voiced her concern in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985) and addressed the epistemic problems affecting the marginalized classes including women. She has rightly raised the issue of cultural differences women of advanced Western world and those disempowered of the Third World. Therefore, modern Western feminism has failed to account for historical experiences of women in Asia, Africa and elsewhere. She argues that the subalterns can not speak because their voices are

'controlled'. In the Indian context, the agency of subaltern women are also embedded in Hindu Patriarchal codes of moral conduct. The British Colonial representation of subaltern women as victims of an orthodox barbaric Hindu culture does not succeed to recover their agency. Spivak argues that subalterns like women and their speech acts are not heard or recognized within dominant political systems of representation. The Indian nation state is again mostly patriarchal in function despite its Constitutional claims of equality and equal rights to all. Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticizes homogeneous perspectives and presuppositions in some of the Western feminist texts that focus on women in the third world and label them as poor, uneducated, tradition-bound women. She challenges the notions that over-categorize non-Western women without considering the class, ethnic, and racial contexts to which they belong to (349).

Therefore, it is amply clear that patriarchal societies have existed for long in the West and the East. It is also marked that in the postcolonial era, humanists, social reformers and feminists have increasingly debated the issues of inequality and discrimination. These issues involving women and other disempowered sections are equally urgent in India and Assam. After the 1980s issues of gender equality emerged as a dominant and a critical thematic concern in Assam. This period witnessed the likes of Anuradha Sarma Pujari, Nilima Dutta, Nirupama Borgohain sharpening their pens and taking up the question of women oppression and empowerment under the patriarchal setup. Nirupama Borgohain's novel *Anya Jiban* (1986), which translates into *Another Life*, projects two kinds of women - Anima that represents submissiveness and docility, and Putali that is rebellious and active. Anima being very submissive accepts everything that comes her way, even when her husband Manoj remarries another woman. While Putali in the same novel hates all males after having seen her mother being tortured by her father. The book throws light on how it is not only the males that are responsible for the discrimination and

oppression of women, but also the stereotypical social values that resist new liberal ideas and values. It considers how until and unless social taboos and superstitions are discarded, people of the traditional societies will not be changed. Borgohain sees Putali as the new women ready to take on the patriarchal world. It was a period in which writers like Taslima Nasreen, Imtiaz Dharker and Kamala Markandaya were raising voices against patriarchal codes of conduct. The chapter has detailed other examples including selected novelists for this study.

The Third Chapter “Woman’s Activism in Bhabendra Nath Saikia’s *The Hour Before Dawn*” shows the power and strength of the woman. The motifs of the feminist writers are to examine whether the females get equal opportunity the way a man enjoys in the society and to interrogate the reasons for exploitations, oppression and suppression of females by their male counterparts. Saikia projects a patriarchal society where Mohikanta represents one of the chauvinists who while being tied to his first wife Menoka through the institution of marriage, enters into a second marriage with Kiron and where Menoka is left to herself. Saikia critiques the social system where a man is allowed to have two or more wives while a woman is restricted and bounded to a single man. In the character of Menoka, Saikia has a brave woman who moves against this patriarchal code by establishing an extramarital relationship with Modon, despite being married to Mohikanta. It is a violation of established societal norm that seeks to tie women to a single man even if she were cheated. Menoka challenges her husband in particular, and the society in general by establishing the love relationship with a lower class man, Modon. This chapter analyses whether Menoka’s reaction against Mohikanta is justifiable or not, and what happens if Menoka were to do it in the first place, or more specifically if Menoka married another man while being tied to Mohikanta. Hiren Gohain opines that Menoka’s action must be understood as an attempt to subvert the rigid norms of the misogynistic society (86). Gohain

justifies Menoka's transgression as an attempt to tame Mohikanta's immoderate and unacceptable action. It is a bitter indictment of the patriarchal world that takes women for granted. While Mohikanta is protected and empowered by patriarchal codes Menoka represents reverse power. If a man with his power and status can marry another woman despite having a wife, why cannot a woman do the same appears to be the implicit message. To some extent, the novel *The Hour Before Dawn* loses the interest of the feminist perspective, because feminism believes equality, but what happens when Menoka uses Modon as a weapon to fight against Mohikanta? Even the novelist Bhabendra Nath Saikia is critical in this aspect since he never highlights the emotional state of Modon who is involved in the extramarital relationship with Menoka.

There are parallels found in such discourses as on husband-wife relationship and marriage tangles. Evelyn Berger Miller, in her book *Triangle: A Betrayed Wife* (1971) observes that the rejected wife often tries to answer back to her husband's earlier misdeeds, and as such she commits herself to the same ethical misdeeds as that of her husband (28). Menoka's revenge on Mohikanta by having an extramarital love relationship with Modon must be understood in that context. According to Gobinda Prasad Sarma, it is a befitting reply to her husband because he has already done injustice and betrayed her by marrying Kiron. Her vow to live with her four children, her only hope after Mohikanta deserts her are a reflection of her audacity in the face of grim circumstances (Sarma 86). Another critic Aparna Mahanta feels that Menoka has resorted to a novel form of protest because in a patriarchy a woman has no alternative but to hold on to the path directed to her. Menoka valued herself as a good wife and mother. So when Mohikanta rejected her after using her for eleven years and brought home a fresh indulgence, she scorched in the fumes of ignominy and decided to make use of her 'receding youth' to procreate another

child whom her husband would not father. Lilabati Bora Saikia also comments on the character Menoka in her article “Bhabendra Nath Saikia Upanyas”. She contends that the occurrences in the life of Menoka transform her from a loving, calm and sensitive woman to a bold, aggressive and a rebellious character who develops herself during the course of the novel (Saikia 561).

Saikia depicts in Menoka a bold and strong woman, ready to take on and subvert the patriarchal norms. She represents the twentieth century Assamese women who were beginning to question and fight societal injustices. Saikia also gives a glimpse of future generation through characters like Indro, Menoka’s elder son. Indro, though a product of the patriarchal society himself, is supportive of his mother and her reaction to Mohikanta. The character of Indro perhaps is Saikia’s imaginative and perspective of what a society should be vis-à-vis women.

Marriage, as a social institution in Assam, sanctions some codified identity to a woman and also assigns patriarchal control over her. In the patriarchal setup, after marriage, a newlywed woman goes through immense pressure as she seeks to situate herself in the family. Household responsibilities, coupled with familial and societal dictate exerts tremendous expectations on women, while men with wealth indulge themselves in many transgressions. This is a phenomenon that cuts across geographical boundaries. Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949), looks at marriage as an “obscene bourgeois institution” (33), whereby one partner is in a perpetual disadvantageous position. Beauvoir observes that in western societies, marriage depends, to a great extent, on money and power, and if a man has power and money then the girl’s parents were willing to give their daughters away (133). In *The Hour Before Dawn* Mohikanta, as a wealthy man, is respected and adored by every villager and he takes advantage of this.

The chapter argues that the point of woman's activism in the novel is not to be stressed beyond Menoka's domestic boundary. Menoka does not reveal her secret or revenge to the public outside. Her husband even dares not speak out against his first wife in the public. Thus the entire case of Menoka's active response does not swell up as a social upheaval as Saikia's novel projects. Nevertheless, the novel has a potent social message to rethink woman's status in patriarchal systems.

The Fourth Chapter "The Forlorn Life of Widows in Goswami and Misra" examines the issues of women, especially the segregations of widows in Hindu society, girl child education and child marriage. This chapter analyses Indira Goswami's *The Blue Necked God* and Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata*. The impact of the patriarchal as well as Brahminical society and its values and principles have led Mamoni Raisom Goswami to write such novels that are socially provocative and reflect lively stories of women. Goswami, a Brahmin herself, saw the restrictions and dogmas of the Brahmins as a menace and a stumbling block to women's emancipation. She often reiterated on different occasions that her novels and other literary works were drawn from direct experiences of her life (Lal 72). She witnessed the plights of widows, who are also known as *radheshyamis* in Brindavan while she was doing her research on the *Ramayana* in Uttar Pradesh. The *Radheshyamis* cut the sorry figure of women held in bondage by a patriarchal religious institution. Canonically, *Radhe* means the milkmaids or the *Gupis* and *Swami* means Lord Krishna in Brindavan. The milkmaids sacrifice their life in serving Lord Krishna. The *radheshyamis* fall victims in the hands of temple priests, landlords, and the temple owners, who exploit, oppress and dominate the widows in Brindavan. Though the locale of the novel is outside Assam, the situation of the widow in Brahminical patriarchy in Assam looks similarly grim. As the story unfolds, Saudamini, the protagonist of the novel *The Blue Necked*



*God* commits suicide at the end of the novel. She is not allowed to remarry after the death of her husband and taken away to Brindavan to engage in some voluntary work. After becoming a widow, Saudamini, the protagonist of the novel *The Blue Necked God* establishes a love relationship with a Christian boy but her parents do not allow her. The chapter raises relevant questions such as whether a woman does not suffer pain like all male persons do, and whether the chauvinistic system does not have to ethically or morally accept a young woman Soudamini's death. Possibly they do not, because in patriarchy the woman has to be subordinated and to surrender herself before the male in particular and the society in general.

The *radheshyamis* in *The Blue Necked God* can be compared to the Brahmin widows in *satras*. *The Blue Necked God* is a representation of Goswami's outburst, and anger for the rigid traditional Brahmin rules, which she has been undergoing. As a young widow, Goswami herself lived the rules and regulations of the *satra* and this Goswami creatively illustrates in her another novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* (2004). Goswami raises some very strong and pertinent questions on the norms and principles which the Brahmins held dear. Goswami's other novel *The Man from Chinnamasta* (2006) is a daring indictment of child marriage.

Child marriage and the exploitation of widows are major thematic concerns in Tilottoma Misra's novel *Swarnalata*. Misra looks at the emergence of the Brahmo Samaj and examines its impact on the Assamese society. The novel *Swarnalata* primarily deals with the issues of widow remarriage and female education. Lakhi, the child widow struggles for her education and identity in a patriarchal Assamese society. Misra depicts the dark side of child marriage through the character of Lakhi, daughter of Panchanan Sarma. In some patriarchal society child marriage is deeply rooted and practiced as an integral part of that traditional society, there an educated man like Panchanan Sarma could not question it. When Charushila Sen, a character in the novel

*Swarnalata* sees Lakhi in white costumes, she immediately comments that it is “the sad outcome of a child marriage” (102). Udayan Misra, the translator of the novel *Swarnalata*, comments that “*Swarnalata* is a moving portrait of social flux and transformation that marked the closing decades of the nineteenth century Assam” (Misra III).

The last chapter entitled “Conclusion” attempts to make concluding remarks on the findings of chapters. From detailed examinations of Mamoni Raisom Goswami’s *The Blue Necked God*, Bhabendra Nath Saikia’s *The Hour Before Dawn* and Tilottoma Misra’s *Swarnalata*, it attempts to understand how different forms of exploitation of women are ongoing in patriarchal society. Instances such as child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage, the pathetic life of widows in religious places like Brindavan, and lack of education have been explored within the texts. Admittedly, patriarchy is a powerful institution that controls and orients human activities and relationships. It takes into account how the idea of female emancipation differs in each of these three texts, foregrounding major female protagonists and their distinct dissenting voices as they encounter hostile and exploitative patriarchal systems.

The selected novelists are consciously motivated to challenging and examining the patriarchal stereotypes that victimize women. The texts form part of the movement that seeks to “change and challenge the whole existing order of things” and display to the desire to bring about “a more balanced and saner equality between the sexes and achieve a respectable individual liberty for women with their natural instincts and characteristics intact” (Tandon 25). The fictions are a seasoned response to the challenges to women in the face of patriarchal hostility. It strives to look at the different avenues and particularities of hardships that keep women subdued. The selected novels in their own way seek to define what a woman is capable of. These aim not only to arrest the ‘fall’ of women under patriarchal weight, but also lays down

new avenues in which a woman can be on her own. The female protagonists are symbolic of the new women who would not accept things as they are. In them we see strong, bold and spirited women ready to take on the patriarchal ethos to task. A patriarchal society by and large is a social institution which secures institutional authority to male members. In questioning these institutions, Saikia, Goswami and Misra emerge as strong voices for women and their causes. These particular novelists of Assam are quite aware of the social conditions of women and their oppressed life. Women of the Third World as presented in the selected novels do not draw neat parallels with those of the first world. Hence their problems and portrayals under specific social situations are presented creatively which solicit appreciations. Moreover, there is no significant difference in attitude towards women in the three selected novels written by women and male writers.

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**IMAGES OF WOMEN IN ASSAMESE FICTION: A STUDY OF SELECTED  
FICTIONS OF GOSWAMI, SAIKIA AND MISRA**

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MIZORAM UNIVERSITY**



**IMAGES OF WOMEN IN ASSAMESE FICTION: A STUDY OF SELECTED  
FICTIONS OF GOSWAMI, SAIKIA AND MISRA**

**BY**

**Lakhyajit Nath**

**English Department**

**Submitted**

**in partial fulfilment of the requirement of the Degree of Master of Philosophy in English  
of Mizoram University, Aizawl.**

**DECLARATION**  
Mizoram University  
**June, 2019**

I Lakhyajit Nath, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to do the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

This is being submitted to the Mizoram University for the degree of Master of Philosophy in English.

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**MIZORAM UNIVERSITY**  
**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

**CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the Dissertation entitled “**Images of Women in Assamese Fiction: A Study of Selected Fictions of Goswami, Saikia and Misra**” by Lakhyajit Nath (Registration No. MZU/ M.Phil./ 442 of 26-04-2018) incorporates the student’s bonafide research, and that this has not been submitted for the award of any degree in this or any other University or Institute of learning.

(PROF. SARANGADHAR BARAL)

Supervisor

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(LAKHYAJIT NATH)

# CONTENTS

	Page No.
<b>Declaration</b>	
<b>Certificate</b>	
<b>Acknowledgement</b>	
<b>Chapter I</b>	<b>1-27</b>
<b>Chapter II</b>	<b>28 – 57</b>
<b>Chapter III</b>	<b>58 – 81</b>
<b>Chapter IV</b>	<b>82 – 106</b>
<b>Chapter V</b>	<b>107 – 118</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>119 – 129</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>Bio-Data</b>	<b>131-133</b>

**Chapter: I**  
**Introduction**

## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

Assamese fictions in translation such as *The Blue Necked God* (2012) by Mamoni Raisom Goswami (1942 - 2011), *The Hour Before Dawn* (2009) by Bhabendra Nath Saikia (1932-2003) and *Swarnalata* (1991) by Tilottoma Misra (1959-) are selected for this study. Its purpose is to explore and examine the images of women as portrayed in these novels. The particular authors have dealt with variegated panoramas of the Assamese society, culture, faith and everyday struggles of the people living in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. However, the present research has undertaken to bring to focus their social criticism, particularly relating to women's issues which appear as a common theme across their separate novels. In a predominantly patriarchal society such as Assam, women are considered stereotypically submissive and docile. This dissertation makes an attempt to interrogate various issues concerning women such as the widow remarriage, girls' education, child marriage which are very predominant in the Assamese society and in the Indian context in general. The attitude of the male chauvinists towards the females and the manner by which women subvert the patriarchal order are the prime concerns of this dissertation.

As is well known, the Indian society has undergone socio-cultural changes rapidly during and after the colonial era in India. Even after seven decades of Independence, many areas in the society remain untouched by modern scientific and democratic system, and especially the condition of women is a major area of concern even today. Writers like Rajani Kanta Bordoloi, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Laskminath Bezboroa, and Nabakanka

Barua were some of the predecessors who appeared early as conscious reformists and got also to inspire moral character development in the Assamese society. The selected writers here are of course motivated by social reformation, but almost the central focus in their writings is on women's issues. Among the three Assamese novels (in translation), two are written by women writers, while one is written by a male author. One relevant problem for the dissertation is to consider if different patriarchal representations of women are in any way influenced by the author's gender consciousness, socio-economic status and value system. Further, this study intends to probe Goswami's awareness of women's plight in *Brindavan* (U.P) and other two novelists' concern with women's issues in Assam, and to explore if their female concerns are similar or not. Besides a few critical studies available in Assamese or English on these writers, not many critical discourses are found in English relating to these chosen texts. The dissertation would try to examine the issues relating to women, their education and widow marriage, as revealed in the selected texts with respect to the Hindu society in general and Assamese society in particular.

What makes Assamese literature more vibrant is its realistic presentation of the narrative, and depictions of the contemporary society with lucid language. Malaya Khaund, an Assamese critic and writer comments on the writing style of Indira Goswami's writings, "in her writings even dead characters are galvanised and come alive at the touch of her magical pen" (Khaund 71). There are many writers from the time of pre-Independence to the present era who have been narrating the social follies and shortcomings, for the peace loving nature of loving Assamese people. The numerous significant thoughts and ideas of the different Assamese authors irrespective of gender make an immense impact not only on Assam and its people; the impact is realisable outside Assam too. Of course the modern influence of missionaries on the Assamese literature during early colonialism cannot be denied. They had introduced modern technologies in Assam including the printing machine.



The Baptist Missionary Press is the first printing press, established in 1843 in Sivasagar district in Assam, the immediate effect of which was felt in the publication and circulation of Assamese writings.

Assamese literature has evolved through many eras. Hema Saraswati in the thirteenth century who wrote the *Pahlad Charita* based on the *Vishnu Purana* can be recognised as the oldest Assamese writer (Bhushana111). The mighty Ahom dynasty was maintaining the written records (*Buranjis*) of history for the future generation. They wrote down the *Buranjis* reflecting the socio-cultural traditions and values as well as the war skills of the indigenous Assamese people in the *sachi* leaves (Deka 1). The *Buranjis* of the *Chutias* and the *Kacharis* are the early examples of the *Buranjis* written during the Ahom rule. Furthermore, Srimanta Sankardeva and Mahapurush Madhabdeva (15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> Century) are two major contributors to the Assamese literature with their numerous *Borgeet*<sup>1</sup>, and *Bhaona*<sup>2</sup>, and they influenced the people of Assam to live in harmony and love irrespective of caste, creed, class, and religion.

In the *Arunudo* era (1846-1870), Assamese literature reached the high level of production and standard with the introduction of new technologies and new ideas in the process of book and magazine printing. The British launched an Assamese magazine with the name of *Arunudo* which means ‘the dawn’ under the editorship of Nathan Brown in 1846. It is the British who tried to enlighten the Assamese people and eliminate the orthodox dogmas in Assam. In the *Junaki* era (1889-1940) in Assamese literature, many Assamese students went abroad for taking higher studies. In Kolkata the Assamese students like Chandra Kumar Agarwala, Jyotiprasad Agarwala among others formed an organisation under the banner of

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<sup>1</sup>Assamese devotional songs were composed by Srimanta Sankardeva and Mahapurukh Madhabdeva in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries

<sup>2</sup>One of Assamese traditional dramas which give strong message of mutual acceptance to the common folk. It is also started by Srimanta Sankardeva

*Asomiya Bhakha Unnoti Hadhini Sabha* (Society for the Development of the Assamese Language) which aimed to uplift the Assamese literature with the inclusion of new ideas and principles which are different from the old traditional norms of the society (Nath 59).

As the present dissertation is focused on garnering images of women in select novels, it is useful to invoke a few important examples in this respect. Among literary genres, novels play a vital role in the history of Assamese literature. In 1884 the first Assamese novel written by a woman writer named Padmavati Devi Phukanani was the *Sudharmar Upakhyan*, which depicted the values and norms of the Assamese society. Phukanani was followed by Hemchandra Baruah who wrote his first novel *Bahire Rang Chang Bhitore Kowa Bhaturi* (1885) (playing in the parlour, empty is the larder) the main theme of which was to eradicate the religious and social evils of that time. They were followed by writers such as Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Chandrakumar Agarwala, Padmanath Gohain Boruah, Navakanta Baruah, and Hemchandra Goswami who wrote many Assamese novels which depicted the Assamese traditional values and principles. (Goswami 46)

Among the selected novelists Mamoni Raisom Goswami is the eldest and an important figure in Assamese literature. She was born on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1942 in a Brahmin family. She was a poet, University Professor, writer, and social activist. Through her writings, she wanted to bring reforms in its cultural, political and moral life of the society. From a tender age, she used to write poems and published a collection of short stories in 1962 in the name of *Chinaki Morom*. She wrote thirteen novels, seven short stories, nonfictions, and two autobiographies. She was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1982 and the Jnanpith Award (the highest national award of India for literature) in 2000. She had also done research on the *Ramayana*. Many of her novels voice against injustices and inequities that crept into the Assamese society. Issues like domination on women, economic injustice, caste system, patriarchy, animal sacrifice are at the forefront of her literary preoccupations. For

example, in the *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda* (1988) or *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tuskar*, Goswami exposes atrocities committed by the male against the female, particularly the young widows. For ages, the females have not been allowed to enter in the *Manikut* (the place where the idols of Gods are placed), or the widows are deprived of all societal engagements, as though they were responsible for the death of their husband (Kakoti 22). The *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda* is an important text on the widow's problem. The protagonist Giribala, a Brahmin widow, breaks the conventional tradition as she enters into love relationship with a missionary, named Mark. Hiren Gohain, an eminent critic and a socialist thinker of Assam remarks that through the *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda* Goswami tries to show the degradation of moral values of the Assamese Brahmin society (Gohain 10). *Sanskar* is one of her short stories where she vehemently reveals the atrocities and the hypocrisies of the orthodox Brahmin society. Born in a Brahmin family Goswami once said "I try to write from the direct experiences of my life. I only mould these experiences with my imagination" (Lal 72).

In *The Blue Necked God* (2012) (*Neelkanthi Braja* in original Assamese) which is a selected text for this study she focuses on the condition of the widows in Hindu society. The novel *The Blue Necked God* reveals the darker side of Brindavan, most ancient holy place for the Hindus in Uttar Pradesh. According to the old customs, the Hindu widows were not allowed to remarry; so they were deprived of social and other opportunities of normal life and consequently they had to go to Brindavan to earn spiritual merit for the rest of their life. In this context the holy city of Brindavan is known as a "city of widows" (Rai). The plight of widows and other women serving as *radheshyamis*<sup>3</sup> are one of the important highlights of her novel which exposes their sexual exploitation. The title of the book is significant in the sense

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<sup>3</sup>Canonically, Radhe means the milkmaids or the Gupis and *Swami* means Lord Krishna in Brindavan. The milkmaids sacrifice their life in serving Lord Krishna.

that in the Hindu mythology Shiva drinks *Halahala*<sup>4</sup> to save the Gods and demons and the world and consequently his “throat becomes blue” and he is thus known as “Neelakantha” (Khanna). The Lord drank the poison that arose from the churning of the sea and controlled the destructive, which also establishes his power over death. Goswami works out this myth to signify a social perspective on a widow who would attempt to control and get over the poisonous situation in her life. In other novels like *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda*, Goswami also critiqued the nature of the Assamese *Satras*, the established institutions of *Vaishnavism*, because these sacred places promoted some dogmatic standards to discriminate against women.

Bhabendra Nath Saikia’s literary career is also markedly noted for his brilliant and passionate concerns for society. Saikia had his doctorate degree from the University of London in 1961 and later worked as a reader in the department of Physics of Gauhati University. He was awarded the Sahitya Academy award (1976) and the National Padma Shri (2001). He wrote twenty-nine books excluding the Assamese journal *Prantik* and *Hafura*. He also worked on films like the *Sondhya Raag* (1977), the *Anirban* (1981), the *Agnisnaan* (1985) etc. His literary works revolved around the social realities of his times. He also worked on children literature. The *Moromor Deuta*, which was translated into English in 1998 as *Dear Father*, is the best example of this. In this novel, he portrays the sacred relationship between child and father. His novel *Antareep* which is translated as *The Hour Before Dawn* (2009) shows the dark side of the patriarchal society of Assam. As the story unfolds, the protagonist Menoka’s husband married and brought home a girl from a nearby village without the consent of his first wife. After the second marriage, he paid no attention to Menoka. To take revenge on Mohikanta and to satisfy her mental as well as physical demands the first wife Menoka develops an extramarital affair with a lowcaste. What Saikia

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<sup>4</sup>the poison of the snake Vasuki which is produced in the churning of the ocean

through this novel tries to show is that how women not exposed to modern education and neo social upheaval could challenge the patriarchal society.

Tilottoma Misra too is a renowned author and critic in Assamese literature. Like other Assamese writers, she wants to bring reformation through her writings to the conservative Assamese society. Her book *Literature and Society in Assam: A Study of the Assamese Renaissance 1826-1926* (1987) gives a vivid description of orthodox Assamese society. In 2017 along with noted writer Mamang Dai was awarded the Luminous Lummer Dai Literary Award for 2017. Her *Swarnalata* (1991) portrays a time when Assam was experiencing modernity in literature. The novel speaks mainly on the issues of remarriage of widows, girl child education, and eradication of the caste system. Misra portrays Gunabhiram Barua who as a true social reformer initiated an institution in Assam under the influence of the *Brahmo Samaj* in the second half of the nineteenth century. Swarna the protagonist in the novel is Gunabhiram Barua's daughter who fights for the remarriage of widows and female education. Swarna's father himself marries a widow and puts up an example to the conservative Assamese society. Swarna takes admission in a missionary school in spite of societal restrictions. Even after the death of her first husband, she marries another man. The whole novel is worked out, as it appears, from the woman's perspective and serves to question patriarchal customs.

In the prevailing social environment and especially in the literary scenario of the contemporaries, Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *The Hour Before Dawn* can be compared with the novel *Swarnalata* written by Tilottoma Misra. Both novels deal with the issue of women empowerment. The prominent difference between the two novels is that, in the *Swarnalata*, Misra shows how to change a patriarchal society with the moral uplift as well as ensure social uplift for women, whereas, in *The Hour Before Dawn*, Saikia is more focused on presenting the male domination and denial of women's freedom. It can be generally marked that modern

Assamese novel writings are mostly driven towards social reformation and renewal of human values.

Further, one may like to get an overview of other Assamese writers whose concerns for women come close to select authors here. A brief overview would again provide the imagined or real images of women characters in Assamese fiction in general. Indira Goswami's *The Blue Necked God* is delicately similar to *Deu Langkhui* (2015) an Assamese novel written by Rita Chowdhury. In *Deu Langkhui*, it is seen that the whole story revolves around the character of Chandraprabha, queen of Pratapchandra. Chandraprabha was banished by her husband to the Gova Kingdom where she felt her identity crisis. It is seen that Chowdhury reveals the conditions of women in the Tiwa society where the queen was sold to another kingdom in *Junbeel Mela* (a clan fair). In the Gova Kingdom, Chandraprabha was forced to change her former identity and changed her name to Konchari. This reveals the dictatorial nature of the patriarch Pratapchandra. Similarly, in Goswami's, *The Blue Necked God*, the *radheshyamis* are victims in the hands of temple priests, landlords, and the temple owners, who exploit, oppress and dominate the widows in Brindavan. Chowdhury's characters are associated with "definite era, social milieu, mental make-up etc" and the characters are "as natural as possible" (Raimedhi 94).

The primary focus of this dissertation is to examine how women are situated in the cultural domain of the Hindu society particularly of Assam. In India, these patriarchal social orders have been in place since ancient times. This social structure generally cuts across regions, faiths, languages, and ethnicities. As the nature of this socio-cultural system is male-dominated, it is found that women, children and so-called low castes in the Hindu class hierarchy are more often marginalised and pushed to the states of nonentity. The patriarchal societal values and norms encourage the women to become calm, submissive and docile. Women are traditionally seen as inferior and weak compared to their male counterparts.

According to Manu, the orthodox Hindu law giver, a woman has to be chaste, modest even after the death of her husband (Manu 197). It is also stated that “a woman must never be independent (Manu 195)”. However, women are also held in a position of reverence in the same text, but the patriarchal nature of Hindu society is not questioned rigorously. These aspects get revealed as Manu states:

Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields reward... The houses on which female relations, not being duly honoured, pronounce a curse, perish completely, as if destroyed by magic. (Manu 55-58)

In the previous as well as the present century, women's issues are at the forefront of all liberal, democratic societies in the West as well as the East (Schreiber). It is a fact that women and children have been discriminated against all over the world. To give a cursory glance at the concern for women's issues in the West, feminist movements started early in the nineteenth century. For example, in 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft published her monumental work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, where she explores the inequalities between her mother and father and observes the problems faced by other women of the society. Specific examples that follow may be seen as to how female authors' awareness and unease about women's exploitation has had prolonged traditions in societies. Many of the celebrated male writers are critically exposed to have patriarchal tendencies.

In 1929, Virginia Woolf wrote *A Room of One's Own* which questions why women rarely appear in history. She points to many depictions of women in the poems and plays which are in real life, but are rarely talked about. The name of this book is itself very symbolic because in the text Woolf argues that a girl must have a room of her own if she desires to express in writing something. Woolf depicts a hypothetical image of

“Shakespeare’s sister” to show the stereotypically calm and submissive women. Though Shakespeare’s sister is equally talented as her brother, her presence is hardly ever acknowledged in the works of Shakespeare (Raimeghi 98).

In the mid-twentieth century, Beauvoir, the French writer and intellectual argues in her work *The Second Sex* (1949) “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (230). She argues that the identity of a woman is constructed and conditioned by some patriarchal norms and principle. Women have to abide by the stereotypical norms in the male dominated societies. This book reveals the mythical depictions of women and how these myths have shaped human consciousness (Tandon 91). She also claims that forlone conditions and situations of “women are not the results of their characters instead their characters are the results of their situations” (Tandon 92).

In the book *Sexual Politics* (1969), Kate Millett writes against D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller and Norman Mailer’s novels where she finds the male supremacy over the female counterparts. She remarks:

Mellors and other Lawrentian heroes incessantly exert their wills over women and the lesser men it is their mission to rule. It is unthinkable to Lawrence that male should ever cease to be domineering individualists. Only women must desist to salve. (224)

Millet examines the difference between gender and sex where she explains that sex is biological indications of a difference between man and woman while gender is socially and culturally constructed (Raimeghi 98). Neeru Tandon describes that Millet attacks the romantic love relationships by saying “it is an emotional manipulation which the male is free to exploit” (Tandon 74). A clear instance of this diagnosis of the institution of marriage as an emotional manipulation can be seen clearly in Mohikanta, who leaves his first wife Menoka



after living with her for eleven years to marry Kiron. Unlike Menoka, Kiron is a submissive and docile natured woman who never questions Mohikanta's atrocities and injustices.

Many Indian writers like Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Romesh Chandra Dutta, Hem Chandra Banerjee and Nabin Chandra Sen, voiced for the freedom of women. The feminist movement in India occurred as a Western impact in the mid-nineteenth century. The Indian feminists very much relied on "various literary and critical models of Western feminism" to express the realities of women in India (John 203). For example the Nobel Prize laureate and the great Bengali poet, novelist Rabindra Nath Tagore declares how the "spirit of Europe" inspired him (Trivedi 125). On the other hand, in *Rajamohon's Wife* (1864) written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee deals with the atrocities on women where the main female character Matangini revolts against the ill-treatment in typical Bengali society. Radha Kumar in her book *The History of Doing* observes that in the political history of British India, male British colonizers raised voice against the Sati practice; and during the Indian Independence struggle, Mahatma Gandhi allowed women's participation and aroused their self-consciousness in social reconstruction (174). Kumar also holds that by the late nineteenth century, women became conscious to "claim control over their own body" (3).

The present study does not claim that the selected novelists have direct influence from the above mentioned Western feminist thinkers. However, these novelists are highly educated and have higher university degrees with professional academic experience. Their indirect inspiration through Western and modern Indian education systems cannot be overturned right away. Male exploitations of women are seen in the three selected texts where male characters dominate societal relationships. It is felt appropriate that the selected writers are briefly situated and located among some of their contemporaries in order that their works get properly evaluated. In *The Hour Before Dawn* of Bhabendra Nath Saikia, the atrocities of

Mohikanta are visible. In *The Blue Necked God*, Goswami portrays the tragically poignant condition of widows in Brindavan, a sacred center controlled by the male priests. The narrative focuses on girl education and promotion of widow marriage is a challenge against patriarchal dogmas in Tilottoma Misra's novel *Swarnalata*. The male chauvinists think that women are fit only for household works and to become responsible mothers. The feminist humanists, on the contrary, look for the possible spaces for the women's freedom beyond the four walls of a house. These premises of women's concerns are distressingly present in the selected texts.

Mamoni Raisom Goswami, Bhabendra Nath Saikia, and Tilottoma Misra are the three selected novelists of this dissertation. It is meaningful to know the locations of these selected writers in the literary scenario of Assam of their time. There are other Assamese novelists like Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Arupa Patangiya Kalita, and Rajanikanta Bordoloi who also write on the woman-centric issues in contemporary times. These fictionists are somehow contemporaries. Though the present study cannot consider their corpus of writings, at least some relevant pieces are cited here for a comparative focus. Many of the works of these writers deal with the lived experience of women. For example, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya's *Mrityunjay* (1970) exhibits discriminations of the women by the exploitative higher class. Women characters like Kalibai and Dimi are involved in the Indian Independence movement. What Bhattacharya tries to show in this novel is that though women along with men have fought for the freedom from British colonialism, they are not given their due respect. Even the Independence movement could not bring better prospects for women, and after getting the Independence, the same prejudices and norms remain in the particular village in the novel. The novel *Mrityunjay* shows that women who struggled for the freedom of the country were later denied personal liberty and social dignity in life. The

women in the post-Independent era have to take responsibility for the entire family without enjoying a moment of relaxation as they were subjected to do repeat the same chores earlier.

The themes and motifs of Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata* and Bhattacharya's *Mrityunjay*, are similar because both these texts emphasise the need for woman empowerment, girl education and eradication of the superstitious belief system. The negligence of women's education and their parents' ignorance are depicted in the novel *Mrityunjay*. On the other hand, characters like Gosain and Dadhi Master encourage parents and guardians to send their daughters to school, so that the girls should get formal education and stand up by themselves. Dadhi Master comments on parents' general perception thus:

There is no habit of the people of sending girls to school...What the girls will do by reading, they are resting bees. Today, they are staying here, tomorrow they will go to another house, after that they will be mothers. (29)

One wonders if the Assamese society of *Mrityunjay* (1970) has evolved downward in two decades as that of *Swarnalata* by 1990 struggles more with girl's educational prospects. Dadhi Master in *Mrityunjay* can be compared with Gunabhiram Borua in Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata*. Both characters are the epitome of the enlightened mind and who are not driven by the old orthodox and traditional taboos and principles. In *Swarnalata*, Gunabhiram Boruah is portrayed as a supporter of the Brahmo Samaj who opposes all forms of inequality prevailing in society, especially the issues of women like girls' education, the widows' remarriage, child marriage etc. (Midgley 365). Boruah is very much worried about child marriage. When Panchanan Sarma wants to arrange the marriage for his daughter Lakhi, Gunabhiram Boruah feels disappointed. Therefore, Baruah challenges the rigid orthodox society by withdrawing child marriage for Swarnalata, his daughter, and marrying a widow Lakhipriya. In the novel *Mrityunjay*, Bhattacharya projects characters like Dadhi Master and

Bhibhiram who try to enlighten the Assamese society by showing the liberal ideas and values instead of practicing the orthodox and traditional principles which cause a threat to the society.

To get a cursory view of the Indian scenario in respect of women's issues, one may think of Nikambe in the present context. *Ratanbai: A Sketch of a Bombay High Caste Hindu Young Wife* (1895) is a novel written by Shevantibai M. Nikambe who traces the exploitation of the high class Hindu. Ratanbai is very much similar with the *radheshyamis* in Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *The Blue Necked God*. The highcaste priest and the landlord make the decision of the society which is usually male favored. By depicting the plight of the widows, Goswami criticises the religious institutions in Brindavan and in doing so criticise other holy shrines like Brahmin *satras* in Assam, for distorting Hindu religion and exploiting the traditional orthodox values to suppress and oppress the women (Hiloidari 18). In an article Pori Hiloidari argues that Mamoni Goswami's writing especially the novel *Datal Hatir Uire Khowa Howdah* witnesses the atrocities of the Brahmin *satra*, where Giribala, the protagonist faces the injustices of the higher class or even from the family members (Hiloidari 19).

In *The Blue Necked God*, Mamoni Raisom Goswami speaks against the existing 'religious institutions' like Brindavan, temples etc. It is ridiculous that when in modern India women could achieve their feats globally, their society's age-old taboos ironically work against the interests of the womenfolk. The Barpeta Satra located in the Barpeta district of Assam, which was established by Vaishnava Saint Mahapurukh Srimanta Sankardeva, still does not allow women to enter the sanctum, and in this sense, the male-dominated order of the *satra* and its Vaishnav society violate women's right to equality in the matter of worship. For example, Mamoni Raisom Goswami's depiction of the pathetic plight of widows in *The Blue Necked God* and Shevanti Nikambe's novel *Ratanbai: A Sketch of a Bombay High Caste*

*Hindu Young Wife* (1895) are same. Nikambe in her novel uncovers pitiable conditions of the high caste Brahmin widow Ratanbai. Indrani Sen speaks in an article:

Brahmin widows including child widows were subjected to innumerable cruelties, privations and social ostracism, ranging from semi-starvation to sexual exploitation at the hands of male relatives. Besides having to wear recognizable 'widow's grab' (which in western India was a dull maroon sari), they were forced to undergo the fortnightly agony of having their heads shaved. (8)

The above mentioned lines depict the real nature of the Brahmin atrocities on the women. The Brahmins formulate principles and norms, which are designed to maintain the status quo in society. Mamoni Raisom Goswami has also felt the discrimination from her own Brahmin community after becoming a widow. But she has not liked to abide by the compulsions and restrictions of the Brahminical norms. In the same way, Ratanbai is a child wife to a Brahmin family when she is eleven years old. Ratanbai "endures the taunts and pretty tyrannies" of the father-in-laws family (Sen 7). When Ratanbai wants to go to school, her in-laws family and even her husband do not allow her to do so. Ratanbai's aunt shouts curtly "what are you going to do by learning?" (Sen 7). According to Ratanbai's aunt women are only meant to do the household things. People with patriarchal mindset never think that what would happen if the girls or the women take formal education in schools.

The *Falinee* (2011) is an Assamese novel originally written by contemporary Assamese writer Arupa Patangia Kalita and translated into English by Deepika Phukan. This novel portrays how violence and ethnic conflict affect people's life, especially that of women. Literally, *Falinee* means 'thrown away'. In this novel the protagonist's name is Falinee. She lost her husband during the ethnic conflict in Assam. After the death of her husband, she runs the house with her son. Thus, this novel traces the struggle of a woman who looks after her

son in times of ethnic conflict. Aside from the protagonist, the novel shows the plight of other women as well.

In *Kharlung* (1976) Manarajan Lahary shows the conditions of women and the social structure of Bodo society. Lahary shows a well balanced Bodo society in terms of gender. Though traditionally the Bodos practice patriarchy, Lahary projects a different picture where every woman in Bodo society is treated equally and they are given equal importance. Gohel, the protagonist's mother sometimes goes to the field to help his son and works there. Even when Gohel's family falls into a financial crisis his sisters work as servants in the landlord's house. Lahary here is merely depicting a utopian fantasy that does not correspond with reality. Novels like *Kharlung* reflect the Bodo people at least think an equal and refined society which never believes in orthodox dogmas and principles. Actually, all the issues of women like the oppression, exploitation, and domination related to the Assamese texts irrespective of any genres, the writers critique the rigid norms and values of the particular society and parallelly he approaches new society by highlighting the follies and foibles of the present chauvinistic society.

In the article "Stereotypical Representation of Women in Assamese Popular VCD Films with Special Reference to Junbaai" (2015) Satyabrat Prasad Saikia reveals how femininity is constructed in society and how different representative genres help in internalizing such social constructs by human psyche, how women are represented in different visual media and finally, it analyses how stereotypical norms related to women can be seen in the Junbaai VCD films. Saikia advocates that the "women's subjectivity cannot be free from the patriarchal norms" (61). It mainly concentrates on representation of women's body and beauty especially in the context of the teenage women, unmarried women, and widows. It examines how the discourse of the select VCD narrates the stereotypical conception of women.

Rajanikanta Bordoloi's first novel *Miri Jiyori* (1894) reveals the patterns of the *Mishing*<sup>5</sup> societal behaviour with respect to women. Though *Miri Jiyori* is a novel on Mishing society it is written in Assamese, and Mishings have gradually adopted the Assamese life style and traditions. This novel can be considered as the first *Mishing* social novel which exposes atrocities on its women. Jonki and Panoi are the couples and both belong to the same community. Jonki's parents do not allow her to marry Panoi because of Panoi's low financial background. At last, they both commit suicide by jumping into a river. Saudamini, the protagonist of Mamoni Raisom Goswami's novel *The Blue Necked God* also commits suicide at the end of the novel. She is not allowed to remarry after the death of her husband and taken away to Brindavan to engage in some voluntary work. After becoming a widow, Saudamini, the protagonist of the novel *The Blue Necked God* establishes a love relationship with a Christian boy but her parents do not allow her. she sometimes speaks that she is not a goddess and she cannot spend her whole life by devoting to do the charity work (71). A woman needs the same space and freedom like a man. But in reality, women are deprived of their rights and fundamental duties. Saudamini speaks to her father that "You are all hypocrites. You are like butcher" (71). Had Saudamini's parents thought about their daughter's needs and desire the novel would not have ended in such a tragic fashion. The parents of Saudamini only concern on what the society think and they always try to mould Saudamini with the typical orthodox values. The narrative raises a number of relevant questions such as whether a woman does not suffer pain like all male persons do, and whether the chauvinistic system does not have to ethically or morally accept a young woman Soudamini's death. Possibly they do not, because in patriarchy the woman has to be subordinated and to surrender herself before the male in particular and the society in general.

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<sup>5</sup>An indigenous community lives on the bank of Brahmaputra river in Assam

Similarly, Anuradha Sarma Pujari (1964- ), a Columnist and female novelist in the Assamese literature, who has written award winning novels such as *Hriday Ek Brigyapan* (1998), *Baragi Nadir Ghat* (2004) and *Sahebpuror Boroxun* (2003), where in all novels project the male character as the one who is determined to challenge the traditional societal norms. Pujari comments on Dharaniram Das, a male protagonist in the novel *Baragi Nadir Ghat* where she says “I created him then fell hopelessly in love with him” (Raimeghi 92). Unlike Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Tilottoma Misra, Pujari does not put blames on the males for the atrocities in patriarchal society. Anuradha Sarma Pujari asserts that the perfect male character is one who has an educated and enlightened mind (93). According to her it is the silence and the submissive nature of women which never question against the injustices (Raimeghi 92). Though, being a woman writer and a feminist she also argues that “it is anathema for a woman writer to always have a feminist viewpoint” (Raimeghi 92).

Looking at the consistent feminist approach centring the woman’s viewpoint to an absence of male viewpoints reasonably, some question if it is difficult for a woman writer to create male characters with the male chauvinist zeal. Rita Choudhury in this context comments that women writers depict the male character with patriarchal mentality so as to fulfill their agenda (Raimeghi 94). But Choudhury does not write the novels in favour of any characters. But compared to Choudhury’s position, Mamoni Raisom Goswami’s depictions of the plight of *radheshyamis* indicate that she is focussed on the male exploitation of the females.

Indian and Western feminists genuinely call for social reformation and cessation to women’s oppression. In discussing women’s alleged inferiority based on their discrimination as explored in creative writings, Neeru Tandon, has found similar situations between the Indian and the Western domains. In her book, she cites the observation of the feminist Judith Astellara who remarks :



Feminism is a proposal for societal transformation as well as a movement that strives to end the oppression of women... As a movement, feminism has a long history of rebellion, more or less organized but always of expression, of oppositions to the social institutions that made possible the inferiority of women. (Tandon 27)

Generally, in feminist novels, there is a prospect of transforming society by various modes of interrogation, social movement, and intellectual war. Some examples cited here may illustrate how in the Western societies women are marginalised, and how creative writers project their situations.

The husband's exploitation of his wife is, according to John Start Mill, "domestic tyranny" which can be compared to the power of a ruthless ruler over his slaves (Mill 65). Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* addresses the perceptions of a man towards woman where Marian does not like to be 'submissive' or cultivate a traditional view of a wife and mother. Besides, she does not want a life which is fully controlled by the voice of a man and where her own feminine identity and values are suppressed. She is depicted as a reflection of a modern woman challenging the system of the patriarchal structure. Marian makes her bold statement "I could not become one of the men upstairs: I could not become a machine person or one of the questionnaires making ladies as that would be a step down" (Tandon 215).

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) Alice Walker discusses the issues of domestic violence which can be compared with Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *The Hour Before Dawn* where Saikia also like Walker exhibits the family issues of Mohikanta and Menoka. Alice Walker beautifully crafts the plot of her novels where the women try to establish their personal and collective identity to show the power of self-dependency in society. Margaret is ignored and neglected, in Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, by her husband

Grange Copeland who is having an extramarital relationship with a prostitute. Josie. W. Lawrence Hogue comments in this context:

Margaret is one of those black women who are submissive and loyal because they have such limited control over their own lives. Dependent on their husbands, such women lose respect for themselves and their husbands. (177)

The submissive women are the product of a conventional society where from childhood the women are treated to become docile, obedient, and calm before the males. In Saikia's *The Hour Before Dawn*, it is Kiron who does not make any comment on her husband's behaviour towards his first wife Menoka. It can be said that Kiron has been living in a society where a good girl never raises any questions on conventional traditional values. That is why though Kiron does not protest against the marriage even though she knows that Mohikanta has given a handful of money to her parents to marry her.

Saikia's depiction of Modon in the novel *The Hour Before Dawn* is significant because he never mentions how Modon feels when Menoka uses him as a tool to take revenge against Mohikanta. And the question arises that whether Menoka, being the wife of a high class family imposes her power of societal hierarchy on Modon to establish a relationship with her or Modon willingly submits his love, emotion, and attachment to Menoka. Saikia's writings in *The Hour Before Dawn* reflects the persuasive and dominant nature of Menoka:

Here was a man she could send for whenever she pleased. He would come and stand before her with lowered head. She could command him in this very moment – come, Modon, kneel before me. And he would obey her unconditionally (82).

Though Menoka voices against the injustices of her husband, Mohikanta, she parallelly manipulates Modon as a weapon to fight against Mohikanta. In Saikia's novel, *The*

*Hour Before Dawn* Menoka represents the high class and Modon signifies the lower class. In this patriarchy, the lower class is relegated to a state of muted submission. Herself marginalized Menoka too exploits this system to her advantage. Thus, she is not to be an iconic principle of idealism and nobility which respects all humans equally and with fair justice. Gayatri Spivak in her monumental essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1985) defines subaltern as the one who does not have one’s own voice, and it is difficult for that person to speak against the injustices of the higher class (290). Hence Modon’s silence hides his real feelings whether of love or agony.

Keeping in view these contemporary novels, though a selective few, one may presume that women’s issues occupy a major space in contemporary Assamese literature. The Assamese literature exposes the social status of a woman and through the texts, the writers raise their voice against the hypocritical nature of the patriarchal society. In Oriya (Presently, Odia) literature, there are many writers like Fakir Mohan Senapati, Gopinath Mohanty, Kantakavi Laxmikanta, and Godavarish Mahapatra who have exposed social problems that involve women’s exploitation in the patriarchal society. Fakir Mohan Mahanty can be said as the first Oriya writer who depicts the problems of women from the psychological viewpoint (Tandon 189). His novel *Chhamana-atha Guntha* (1902) shows the suffering and struggling woman character like Sarita, a weaver whose property is taken away and is murdered.

In the patriarchal Assamese society, representation of women in creative and performance songs such as popular *Bihu*<sup>6</sup> songs may also draw attention to the similar problems. Earlier the *Bihu* songs were meant to unite the peasants with other village folks, but gradually it has been undergoing many evolutions (Shriya). It is seen that modern Bihu songs are full of patriarchal values and the sense of sexual objectification of women. The

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<sup>6</sup>*Bihu* is the chief festival of the Assamese people, celebrated three times in a year.

main intention of celebrating the Bihu festival is merrymaking, dancing and singing in the midst of a village. The modern Bihu songs and videos are the depictions of vulgar and licentious images. The traditional Assamese Bihu attires like *Sadar mekhela*<sup>7</sup> are replaced by some revealing and stylish clothes. Bihu songs reiterate the traditional conception of women as housewives and nothing more.

The death of the victim in a patriarchal society is a significant theme in many Assamese novels including *Miri Jiyori*, and *The Blue Necked God*. But in some other Assamese novels, authored by both male and female authors, the characters in one way or the other, fight against injustices and atrocities. In the novel *Falanee* Arupa Patangia Kalita, an Assamese writer depicts how violence and riots lead to the emotional, mental, and physical destruction of a woman. The novelist presents the most humane view of a woman who used to be respected for her being a human being outside other consideration of caste, clan, faith and national borders. Significantly in Assamese *Falanee* means anything not useful or worthy, hence to be “thrown-out” (Medhi 49). The protagonist loses her husband and in-laws family in a riot against the illegal migrants in Assam. At first, Falanee is arrested because of her ambiguous identity, as being a Bengali girl she has married a man, Lombodar from Koch community. In the refugee camp, Falanee faces severe exploitation from the males. She even has to replace her chador mekhela and wear *dokhona*<sup>8</sup>. Arupa Patangia Kalita depicts female characters with extraordinary power to fight against the injustices and unequal treatment. Kali Buri is one important character in the novel *Falanee* who encourages her fellow women to be strong, bold and aggressive. Arupa Patangia Kalita symbolically depicts Kali as the epitome of the Goddess Kali who suppressed Lord Shiva under her feet. According to the character Kali Buri in the novel, women are like *jalakia* (chilli) which

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<sup>7</sup> Assamese traditional dress for women

<sup>8</sup>Karbi community traditional dress

signifies that like the chili, these women may look weak and docile but have great strength and ability (66). During the last part of the novel *Falanee*, the protagonist, becomes strong and along with the other women, she compels the army personnel to free her son from the prison. In Saikia's *The Hour Before Dawn* and Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata*, it has been depicted that the women are not submissive and they can fight against the cruelties, atrocities perpetuated by patriarchies.

Considering the women-centric issues in selected novels of Goswami, Saikia, and Misra one can fairly see that the authors' voices of concern come to resemble the modern feminist voice and often raise to claim social equality and justice for women. There are minor women characters in each of the select novels, but these characters are reduced largely into insignificance in the patriarchal society. The major female protagonist always steals limelight, and the writer has focused on her central significance in the fiction. The study would like to make use of feminist thought and perspectives in order to examine and assess these novelists. This dissertation proposes to examine their social worlds by five chapters.

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**CHAPTER II:**  
**Critiquing Patriarchal Society**

## Chapter II

### **Critiquing Patriarchal Society**

This chapter would propose to place in view some of the eminent feminist writers and their critique of the societies to which they belong. Even their conscious social exposure holds true to most patriarchal systems the world over. Patriarchy is a social system which determines the positions of men and women in a society. Friedrich Engels, in his book, holds that patriarchy is the defeat of the female sex (11). In this context, the patriarchy is a societal structure that tries to subjugate and dominate the female members of the society. According to Gerda Lerner, patriarchy is not a “one event”, instead it has evolved or rather developed approximately around 3100 BC to 600 BC (8). In a family system, the ‘father’ is traditionally regarded as the authority who decides the plans and takes care of the family while the other younger members, including the women play the submissive role. The nature of a misogynistic society, on the other hand, is so unjust to females that the males only see and want to satisfy their own desires because ideologically the men belong to the superior category and the women are regarded as the property of the males (Gerda 24).

Patriarchy is a system of control which includes violence, exploitation, disregard, insult, discrimination, and oppression. It is also noteworthy that the patriarchal structure is different from culture to culture, religion to religion and class to class. For instance, though the notion of patriarchy in tribal areas are same with that of other socio cultural setups in other places, the experience of patriarchy, however, is different from region to region (Bhasin 20). Principal religions have also played an important role in perpetuating and maintaining the patriarchal orders and principles. They introduce various stories like ‘from Adam’s rib Eve was created’ which show the males supremacy over the females (Bhasin 21). Likewise,

in Muslim traditional system the *pardah*<sup>9</sup> practice is prominent for the women which show the dominant nature of the males. The feminists question the practice of hiding of her face to the male in a society and categorically call for these injustices to women to eradicate.

Monique Deveaux's "Feminism and Empowerment: A Critical Reading of Foucault" (1994) juxtaposes the Foucauldian theory and the feminist theory. In this article, Deveaux discusses the effects of power on the body and how it produces what Foucault calls 'docile bodies' (223). What Foucault is trying to say is that the body is subjected to the "regime of truth" to which it is historically situated, and as such, is constructed to serve and reflect the hierarchical structure that produces it. Foucault uses the example of soldiers because they are trained, transformed and made ready to fight (Foucault 137). In that sense, women in a patriarchal society are manipulated and reshaped according to the wishes of the males. What the males dictate or order, the females have to adhere. Foucault's concept of biopower is also a very important topic in this essay which denotes the power to control large populations or groups. He took institutions such as schools, colleges, and prisons to describe how docile bodies are disciplined. Foucault stresses the point that where there is power there is resistance (Foucault 8). And feminism is steeped in this notion of resistance. This chapter will examine the different facets of resistance to power that are portrayed in the selected novels.

Further, Simone de Beauvoir, the French feminist, theorist and writer claims that "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 283). She further argues that one's identity is determined not in terms of physiology or biology, instead it is civilisation and society that gives women an identity. In the introduction of the book *The Second Sex* Beauvoir addresses a question "What is a woman?" (15). She is aware of her French society and its patriarchal environment, which is generally reflective of European culture. She explains that a man never depicts himself as an individual of certain sex and everyone accepts without speaking that he

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<sup>9</sup>A curtain or a kind of veil used by the Muslim women to cover their face

is a man. The term feminine and masculine are only used in the legal papers (14). The word man according to Beauvoir represents the neutral and the positive (in general, the common use of man defines the whole human being), while the woman is defined only in the negative terms with some limitations (15).

The technique of “demystification” is employed by Beauvoir to attain her feminist goal. She tries to break the silences of the women in the patriarchal societies. She mentions in her autobiography that how men use women in their religions, literatures, cosmologies and superstitions. It is generally same for all the patriarchal societies that throughout the world the men position themselves as the subject and women as object or the other. Simone de Beauvoir shows how the notion of the “true feminine” is fashioned, and how the female is pointed as other. She also interrogates the world in which the females should live (67). Men get satisfaction from the women’s dependent attitude in many ways. That is why men never want to avoid the superior position. In this context, Beauvoir reveals the dependent position of women is ‘natural’ which is beneficial for both men and women. Man made historical events, and the parallel processes and engagements oppress females. The dependence of woman is not related to any historical and social change; instead it is because of their (women) physiology and anatomy. In contrast of Marxist feminist thought Beauvoir states her clear cut stand that women problem requires a holistic approach whereas Marxism proposes only economic factor of human life (Bhagwat 88).

Like Beauvoir, Kate Millett in America is one of the prominent figures who raise voice concerning the women issues. She in her book *Sexual Politics* (1970) tries to break the male supremacy and she shows the nature of the male hegemonic characters in the works of Mailer, Genet and Miller. Mailer and Miller’s subsequent use of masculine imagery and vocabulary invoke the “sexual intercourse into a political event” which leads the victory of the masculinity. In the works of Mailer, Genet and Miller, according to Millett the heroes are

illustrated as sexually appealing and having patriarchal attitudes and women are depicted as weak on the other hand. Males in white societies are glorified and idealised in the mentioned texts and the females are degraded. According to Millett in the process of sexual politics three patriarchal factors are associated such as status, role and temperament (Bhagwat 183). The male superiority is basically based on status which is incorporated with power. On the other hand, 'role' is a sociological component and 'temperament' is designated to assign human personality along stereotypical lines of sex categorisation (Bhagwat183).

Emerged in the late 1970's, the feminist cultural studies have been a subject of research not only for popularising the gender studies but also most importantly it establishes gender as a mode to explore the cultural study in a broad way (Meagher 271). Stuart Hall, the cultural theorist and the sociologist defines feminism as an "interruption" that changes the practice of studying cultural studies (Escosteguy 63). In his autobiographical book *Minimal Slaves* (1993), he explains about his migration experiences and the discovery of black identity in a multicultural society. The notion of multiculturalism is understood through the freedom struggles, civil right movement and feminist movement (Ponzanesi 91). On the other hand the feminist philosopher Susan Moller Okin in her essay 'Is Multiculturalism bad for women' (1999) argues that multiculturalism and feminism both need the identification of differences in terms of the existing norms (Ponzanesi 92). Cultural minorities also require some special rights which can strengthen their positions in societies. The special right is simply an attempt to go equal with the majority groups. But the special group rights are seemed to be biased to gender equality as it violates the individual rights and enforces the members of the particular group to follow the norms and the rights. Okin cites some examples of women's problems like polygamy, child marriage, *pardah* and divorce system which have been happening due to the special rights of the groups. (Ponzanesi 93)

In England Virginia Woolf plays an important role to fight against the injustices of women. "Men and Women" (1920) is one of the most influential essays in the field of feminist studies where she reveals that the history of human being is simply the history of human failure, aspirations and achievements is based on men only (Gaur 2). And it is only through the fiction and other literary genres as well which can give a glimpse of women's status within a limited period of time. Before the nineteenth century, Woolf comments that, the literary texts are in soliloquy instead of dialogue form because men only want to talk about themselves. In case if a man wanted to speak on women, it was mainly on the rules and regulations for the women or how a woman must behave in a patriarchal society (2). Women are depicted in the literature by men, and this depiction is controlled by men or simply it is the demonstration of what the chauvinist wants in women. Woolf's feministic zeal is clearly seen through female characters in her literary texts. *The Voyage Out* (1915) is her first novel where Rachel, the heroine of the novel is searching her real identity in the society and refuse to abide by the readymade norms and the values of the patriarchal society.

In the case of African American community Alice Walker has to offer us telling pictures which too present a patriarchal structure in America. For Example Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) portrays the inhumane behaviour of the whites on the black African people. Through this novel, Alice Walker textualies the struggles of the black women and raises a voice against the white American patriarchal society. The protagonist Celie is a fourteen year old girl, who is depicted as defenceless in the white society. She is not allowed to go to school and her step father repeatedly rapes her (32). Her step father rebukes her by saying "Who you think you is?..... You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman" (Gaur 32). On the other hand, in the article "The White Woman's Burden: From Colonial Civilization to Third World Development" Jawad Syed and Faiza Ali show how Kipling's idea of 'white man's burden' is different from the notion of 'white woman's burden'. White man's burden

projects other culture and heritage as demonic and childlike, while, white woman's burden mainly concentrates on the gender issues which disparage the value, voice and the identity of a woman in terms of color (Syed 349). It is also noteworthy to mention African black feminist Kohrs- Amissah who blames the Western feminism for not encapsulating the true picture of the African black women's struggles. According to her the Western feminists also have the sense of 'superiority' and in their narratives of gender they project the negative sides of the coloured women instead of capturing the true image (Syed 353).

Julia Kristeva, the Bulgarian French philosopher and feminist advocates that the use of the term 'feminism' or 'woman' is necessary as the liberation of women is fully dependent on identity politics (Oliver 97). According to her the identity politics should be individual rather than categorised in groups. She does not like the feminism which tends to divide by many groups such as "homosexual", "heterosexual" and "women" etc (98). In her essay "Women's Time" published in *New Maladies of the Soul* (1979) she rejects the first wave of feminism because of its overlook sexual disparities and it seeks universal equality. Kristeva supports the third wave feminism which tries to reconsider the difference and identity and their relationships (103). This phase of feminism refuses to recognise identity on the basis of differences rather it exposes multiple sexual identities.

On the other hand, Gayatri Spivak an eminent Indian feminist and postcolonial critic in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985) writes to voice in favour the weaker class or the marginal people including the females. Spivak in that essay advocates two different types of representation, one is *vertreten* (to raise voice or to represent politically) and the other is *darstellen* (aesthetic sense of representation) (Hinterberger 75). According to her, in order to attain "beyond representation" there is a tendency in feminist identity politics to amalgamate these mentioned two types of representation.



In Indian society, the importance of boys and girls are different (Goswami 83). The 'Laws of Manu' (2<sup>nd</sup> Century B.C.) which continue as the Hindu moral codes at cultural levels, proposes that women are dependent and separate from their male counterparts (Sawant 22). A woman has to surrender herself to the males: father, husband, and her son. Father is the first male guide of a woman and when she marries she has to obey her husband and at the old age her son plays the role of her guardian. In the post Vedic India the women were regarded as goddess while the statuses of the females were degraded in the *Puranic* period. As Ram Ahuja mentions, the prepuberty marriage came into existence, *sati practice* emerged, *purdah* system became prevalent and even it is said that 'a woman and a slave cannot own property' (Sawant 23).

A social structure which is discriminatingly based on gender plays a vital role classifying the society into two distinct orders patriarchy and matriarchy. Every society has its own values, traditions, rituals by which people try to conduct themselves by continuing links between the past and the present. The people in that society are not willing to give up their own conventional rules, whether good or harmful to most members. Mostly, patriarchal societies, have put barrier against women's freedom. It is the knowledge which originates from conscious study and awareness of the patriarchal systems that encourage feminist responses and shapes female attitudes, perspectives, hypotheses, and disciplines. Along with the Western feminists like Virginia Woolf, Julia Kristeva, and Kate Millet there are many Indian feminists like Babasaheb Ambedkar, Rammanohar Lohia, Ishwarchand Vidyasagar, and Jotirao Phule whose views have critiqued and questioned the patriarchal society. Ambedkar said that every married woman should have the courage to challenge the life of slave and they should know their rights and principles (Singariya 2).

In the postcolonial world, the patriarchal society defines the Dalit studies, women exploitations, child labour etc. According to Leela Gandhi, it is the feminism which

encourages postcolonialism, it's a diverse effect on the world differently or it helps postcolonialism to grow a more self-reflexive kind of cultural nationalism (Parashar 371). On the other hand, postcolonialism provides feminism with a new way to look at all sites of oppression. The collaboration of feminism and postcolonialism came up with the concept of "third world women" (Mohanty 336). This concept was formulated by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her edited book *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* in which she criticises some Western books for depicting the nonwestern women as some monolithic subjects (Mohanty 349).

The focus of this dissertation is on women's issues and empowerment in India since the 1960s, and three selected Assamese novels written by indigenous Assamese authors are examined in the context of these issues.

From the age of the *Mahabharata*, the patriarchal form of society in India is being witnessed in existence. For example, Draupadi is a victim pointed to a patriarchal society where she had been a single wife of the five *Pandavas*, namely Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva (Bhalla 95). She took care of them equally. She was forced to disrobe in the presence of all patriarchs being silenced by Duryadhan, an immoral prince of power, but Lord Krishna alone came to help her (98). In the pre-historical society the Brahminical people also hated or exploited the weaker class of people including the women and the widows. Caste hierarchy and the gender hierarchy are the established principles in every part of Indian society. The prevalent norms and the domination of women in the Brahminical structure have been continuing for generations. Nur Yalman in her essay "On the Purity of Women in the Caste of Ceylon and Malabar" states while virginity is really important for a woman to maintain her dignity in society, the same standard does not hold for the men. In this essay she studies the orthodox norms of the Hindu society. Earlier in the Hindu society, especially in the Brahminical societies gender, class and caste played a

significant role which shaped the nature of the Brahminical patriarchy. In *The Blue Necked God*, Indira Goswami, the author exposes vividly the Brahminical society (Yalman).

The stereotypical norms of any patriarchal society restrain women to express their own desires and feelings. Alice Munro, the Nobel Prize winner in the literature category in 2013 and a Canadian short story writer advocates against the conventional norms of the society. The themes of her short stories are on women empowerment and to strengthen the women's position in a society. Munro's female characters question the society's assumptions and beliefs about the women's behaviour and their role in society. Munro projects herself in her short stories and novels not merely as a writer but also as a female artist who fights for the women's freedom and rights. In her short story *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) she portrays the clashes between the traditional form of society which is patriarchal and the liberal kind of society. Del Jordan, the protagonist of the short story reveals how her feminist attitude becomes a challenge to the patriarchal society. Gender consciousness and the stereotypes have signified the fact that there are many differences between man and woman in terms of interests, physical characteristics, status level, personality, occupational roles and in many other ways. Sometimes it is seen that women establish their attitude and personality in such a way that signifies the difference between man and woman. Consciousness of female biological desires, obeying the familial roles, and emphasising the feminine status often impact the career choice of women. Del Jordan's decision in *Lives of Girls and Women's* about her career is merely influenced by the command of her feminine attitude and her orthodox patriarchal belief. Del's aunt Elspeth criticises Del's mother for her "intellectual pursuits" because Elspeth follows the traditional norms which is admired and encouraged by the society while Del's mother challenges such orthodox attitudes (Gaur 45).

Many post colonial literary works by men or women depict the stress between patriarchal structures and a gendered modernity. For example, Egyptian novelist, feminist and

an activist El Saadawi vividly exposes the relationship between the women's exploitation, oppression and religious doctrines particularly in the Egyptian post colonial society. In *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) written by Saadawi, Firdaus does not want to go to her husband's place because he frequently beats her. Firdaus's uncle's wife consoles her by saying that all husbands beat their wives even she has been experiencing that situation (Nayar 142). At first Firdaus refuses to believe, because her uncle is a religious priest who gives knowledge about religions particularly the Muslim religion. Firdaus's uncle's wife explains that "the precepts of religion permitted such punishment. A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience" (Nayar 44).

El Saadiwi through the lens of gender and religion satirises the Egyptian patriarchal society. Famous Bangladeshi controversial writer Taslima Nasreen gets threatened from her own people because she exposes the Muslim atrocities and exploitations in Bangladesh on the Hindu minority including women in her novel *Lajja* (1993). In *Purdah* (1989) Imtiaz Dharker explicitly shows how *purdah* becomes an instrument for suppressing women's identity and it is the symbol of Islam's suppressive structure (Nayar 147). In this context, Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani opposes the *purdah* system. Pramod K. Nayar remarks, through *Nectar in a Sieve* Markandaya tries to say that in terms of restrictions Hindu women face situations less severe than that of the Muslim women (146).

Among the post colonial Indian women writers, it is Kamala Das who first discusses sexuality in a patriarchal and conservative society (Nayar 149). *My Story* (1988) is her autobiographical work where she mentions her experience with sexuality and the principles of sexual performance that marriage requires. Kamala Das's poems discover a new platform in depicting the woman. She questions the importance of marriage from the sexual point of view. In her poem *The Maggots* (1997) she portrays the love relationship of Radha and Krishna where Krishna asks Radha whether his kisses trouble her (149). In *Woman at Point*

*Zero Firdaus* begins to become a prostitute after she is abused physically and verbally by several men. Later she realises that she should take control over her body and her sexual urges. The only way to regulate women's sexuality is by questioning the moral aspect (150). In Bhabendra Nath Saikia's novel *The Hour Before Dawn* Menoka's extramarital affair with Modon, a servant of the house, is questioned with a pointer to the moral degradations of women.

In most of the Women's life writings or their autobiographical works, the females' problems are depicted explicitly. What is seen in diaries or memoirs of the post colonial women's narratives that the quest for identity, females oppressions in terms of caste, colour and creed and many more. In the contemporary era in India such autobiographical writings stand as a challenge to the patriarchal society. For example Bama is a Dalit Tamil feminist author who in her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (2000) depicts Dalit feminism in terms of caste and religion. The novel shows the traumatic narratives of social change, resistance, pain and protest. Life writings such as Bama's *Karukku* are re-establishing the self after the unwanted event. Every literary text in this genre gives a collective document as the story moves from an individual experiences to the community level. In this context Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1992 and American activist Rigoberta Menchu's autobiographical text *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (1983) writes that the book is the "testimony of my people" (151). On the other hand, the epigraph "sixty million and more" of Toni Morrison's monumental novel *Beloved* is very significant with the fact that it dedicates and remembers the sixty million black people who have been killed in the Atlantic Slave trade and they are still suffering from the trauma and the past is still haunting them (Morrison).

The independence of woman is more important in the feminist study. Women are meant to be free from the societal, cultural and individual bondages. Simone de Beauvoir remarks on woman's freedom that "once (a woman) ceases to be a parasite, the system based

on her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe there is no longer any need of a masculine mediator” (Ghosh 34). But the woman’s freedom in the patriarchal society is very less as it is reflected in the modern Indian women novelists. For example, in Indian writers like Mannu Bhandari’s novels what is depicted is that the dilemma between the society’s expectation and the projection of individual identity. Women are depicted as helpless in choosing the right path because they neither totally escape from the traditional bondage nor exercise the freedom according to their own will. Bhandari also stresses that the economic and educational dependence of women help the patriarchs to exploit or suppress the females (Ghosh 35). In Bhandari’s play *Bina Diwaron Ka Ghar* and the novel *a Bunty* reveal the confusion and mental helplessness that arise due to injustice of women in the patriarchal societies. Ajit in the play *Bina Diwaron Ka Ghar* is epitomised as a typical post colonial Indian man who cannot treat his wife equally.

The women characters of Anita Desai’s novel psychologically show the outcome of their passive reaction. In *Voices in the City* (1965) Desai examines the inner world of women through three characters Monisa, Amla and their brother Norod Roy. They want a mysterious trip to enjoy the serenity and solitude of jungles, but they are forced to stay in Calcutta which is a place of death and despair (Misra 52). Monisa is getting married against her will and her frustration comes when she says that “they put me away in steel container, a thick glass cubicle and I have lived it in all my life without a touch of life or hate or warmth on me” (52).

The Indian fictional writer Nayantara Sahgal says that women irrespective of any religions have the same fate (Maurya19). Sahgal in her book *Mistaken Identity* (1935) uses history to show the status of women in the Indian society especially relating to Muslim women. Bhushan, the protagonist’s mother of the novel *Mistaken Identity* spends a major part

of her life in *Zenana*<sup>10</sup>, whose significance seems same as a Muslim woman wears *burkha* (veil). Sahgal's importance to clothing in this novel also signifies the religious and cultural connotation. The used of *burkha* or veil expresses to "conceal women's sexuality", "to restrict freedom", and "to conceal identity" (Maurya 19). Willey-May, a European lady and another character in the novel *Mistaken Identity* tries to know the importance of wearing *burkha*. Bhushan replies that "you can't see through a veil... and it covers a lot more than your nose" (19). It is the patriarchal dictum of the conservative Muslim society where it is made mandatory for the women to wear *burkha*. Sahgal in the same novel portrays a Parsee woman, Sylla who is more liberal in terms of her thinking ability and challenges the society. For example, she swims openly in a bathing suit, wears frocks and even bobbed her hair, which are all against the traditional principles of the Parsee society (Maurya 20). Bhushan actually wants to take Sylla to his place to show how a woman should look like and behave in a society instead of believing in the traditional rules and values.

The status of women particularly in India has been portrayed explicitly in Sashi Deshpande's novels. In most of her works it has been seen that women are at the centre they undergo the traumatic experiences. Deshpande's heroines suffer a lot since they become the victims in the hands of the patriarchs and the women characters are not aware of their own rights or they do not protest against the injustices. Ajis and Kakis are two female characters among the others in the novel who do not get any chance to grow and develop except they are bounded to do the household things. In the novel *The Long Silence* (1988) Jeeja also decides to live her life without raising any voice against her husband's atrocities and exploitations. Julia Kristeva's theory of feminism can be related to the Deshpande's typical oriented novels. What Kristeva says that the marginalisation of woman offers a courage which can transcend the marginality and activates her epic centric participation of life (Gaur 66).

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<sup>10</sup>Secluded place specially for Muslim women

The quest for autonomy of women can be called the prime factor of feminist movements. Particularly in Kamala Markandaya's novels the female characters are in search of autonomy, freedom and their identity. Characters like Mohini, Lolitha, Saroja, Meera symbolise that the economic difficulties and the higher consciousness in regards of their rights are the reasons which cause obstacle the Indian woman characters to get autonomy. Rukmini in *Nectar in a Sieve* shows or generalises the larger group of underprivileged and ignored women in India particularly in the rural areas. The labourers including the females back are bent with uncredited works and their problems are hardly written. Markandaya through the character Rukmini tries to show the forlorn conditions of the poor female labourers and though their work is more or equal to the men, they have been given less amount of money compared to men. The same kind of pathetic condition of labourer is seen in Mamoni Raisom Goswami's social protest novel *Chenabor Sot* (1972) (The Stream of River Chenab). Goswami describes the pathetic lives of the female workers in the industry and other construction sites. Goswami being a wife of an engineer witnesses the conditions of the poor workers.

The patriarchal structures whether in Europe or India are mostly oppressive and repressive towards women. The case of traditional Assamese society in this context is not any better. Assamese writer and thinker Banikanta Kakoti in one of his essays "Nari Hriday" (1948) (women's heart in English) says that "the authentic picture of a woman's heart and nature in literature will remain elusive until the emergence of female writers with original talents" (Goswami 57). In Assamese language many women writers emerge like Indira Goswami, Tilottoma Misra, Arupa Patangiya Kalita, Rita Chowdhury, Nirupama Borgohain, Nirmal Prova Bordoloi who in their literary works including short stories, novels, poems along with other realistic themes depict primarily the problems of the women in Assamese society and hence by reading their literary texts one can understand about women's desires



and aspirations. Mamoni Raisom Goswami is such a bold and courageous writer that her novels and short stories are acclaimed for the realistic themes and depictions. The *Sanskar* (1998) is one of Indira Goswami's famous short stories where she vehemently opposes the hypocritical orthodox Brahminical values and principles (Goswami 58). The story of *Sanskar* revolves around the pathetic and forlorn life of a young poor widow Damayanti. Though she is a widow she has physical and emotional desires which she cannot fulfil because of the resistance from the conventional Brahminical society. Later, Damayanti engages in an illegitimate relationship with a non Brahmin man Pitambor. When Damayanti gets pregnant, the Brahmins force her to destroy her foetus, and she buries it (58). From this story the cruelty of patriarchal society is exposed. Similarly in the short story *Odong Bakas* (1998) (Empty Boxin English) Indira Goswami narrates a classless society where people learn the bad effects of class hierarchy. Likewise, in Nirupama Borgohain's novel *Iparor Ghar Hiparor Ghor* (1979) Poteswari, a village woman is subjected to physical and mental oppression where a wealthy man from the particular patriarchal society not only exploits her but also sends her daughter to work as a maid to earn on the basis ten rupees per day. It shows that women have not given proper due status even in the last of the twentieth century. Nirupama Borgohain has been awarded Sahitya Academy for her monumental novel the *Abhijatri* (1995) which gets a new dimension with the depiction of female's predicament. The *Abhijatri* is partly an autobiographical novel where the protagonist Chandraprava not only struggles for her own identity but also awakens all Assamese females to grab their rights at any cost. In this regard G.P Sarma's comments on her are noted: "She is the first novelist in Assamese literature who has consciously written feminist novels" (Devi 9).

It is noteworthy that the women in the developing country or the colonial country take significant part in the freedom struggles. It is no exception in the African countries also. The very political term 'negrofeminism' is first coined by Obima Nnaemeka to define the

feminism of negotiation, accommodation and compromise (Nayar 135). Particularly in African societies, the word ‘mother’ signifies grandmother and motherhood becomes an important theme in African Literature. At the same time many writers criticise the African culture for the “denigration of childlessness” (Nayar 135). The motherhood becomes a parameter to identify the women’s position in these societies. In the post colonial novel *The Joy of Motherhood* (1980) African writer as well as black activist Buchi Emecheta questions the idea of motherhood in the African society. The protagonist Ego exposes that women cannot have an identity without becoming a mother (135). In the Indian context, people still have the stereotypical idea that male heirs are more important than the females. Sahgal’s *Mistaken Identity* shows how the female child killing has become a “custom ritual” because in the Hindu society people prefer son (138). Similarly in Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni’s novel *Sister of My Heart* (1999), Sobha has abortion because her in – laws do not want daughter in their family.

Apart from its pathetic aspects, marriage gives an identity to a woman. Many of the Indian writers expose the bitter outcomes of marriage system where a woman has to do every household thing. In the traditional Hindu religion, marriage simply means the service to the husband, notion of chastity, motherhood and all (Nayar 132). In Bharati Mukharjee’s novel *Wife* (1975) the protagonist Dimple realises that “her life had been devoted to pleasing others, not herself” (132). Similarly in Sashi Deshpande’s literary works, especially in fictions reveal the pathetic world of marriage where the woman is completely destroyed by marriage. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) the wife is abused by her husband though she is financially and socially successful. Likewise in her literary works Kamala Markandaya reveals how a woman’s desires, ambitions and education are counted as less important than the role as a wife, daughter – in – law and mother. Her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* Rukmini the protagonist questions about the value and importance of education in the life of a housewife like her.

Because, no matter how many educational degrees she has, a woman in some patriarchal societies has been treated as a slave. In this regard Rukmini's mother asks her "Look at me, am I any worse that i cannot spell my name, so long as I know it" (132). It is also worth mentioning that many post colonial Indian woman writers depict marriage as the symbols of oppression and violence. What is seen particularly in the narratives of the woman writers that they give more emphasis on the women's identity and their problems in a patriarchal society and they very realistically craft the issues of women into their literary works. Sometimes the writers write down their own experiences. For example, in some stories and novels Indira Goswami is critical of the orthodox nature of the Brahmin community since they have imposed their conventional values and principles in Assam.

In the Indian freedom struggle, women also took equal part as the men. But it is seen that the value of women's participation is belittled and ignored. It is German thinker George Mosse who has posed that modern masculinity is evolved parallelly with nationalism which is defined by the terms like patriotism, honour and duties which are masculinised (Nayar 122). In the context of India, Rabindra Nath Tagore in his novel *The Home and the World* (1919) and Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath* (1882) depict the participation of women in the Indian freedom struggle movement where the image of 'Mother India' is shown which symbolises the nation and is imaged as a woman associated with the terms of roots, home, hearth and many more (Nayar 122). In the nineteenth century, the Indian reformer, activist Pandita Ramabai criticises the English government for not giving adequate attention to the Indian women (123). The stereotypical notion about women is also depicted in R K Narayan's fiction *Waiting for Mahatma* (1955) where Narayan uses figures like Mahatma Gandhi to show the typical thinking of Indian society. In *Waiting for Mahatma*, Sriram and Bharati both fall in love with Gandhi. When Gandhi looks at them they blush and

he declares that this is the good sign of a faithful bride (252). Gandhi here uses the stereotypical sign to recognise a bride's character and behaviour.

The gender stereotypes are also seen in Indian myth also. For example women are depicted in terms of their husband such as Nala – Damayanti, Ram - Sita, Satyavan – Savitri and many more. They are illustrated as the epitome of faithfulness, chastity and devotion (Singh 51). For example, Sita in mythology is a symbol of symbol of self effacement, chastity and purity (51). On the other hand Tulsidas, the great medieval poet and thinker compares wife to a maid who serves her husband's every need (Singh 50). Even in the twentieth first century the stereotypical notions about women still continue in the society.

Patriarchy is a social order in a society where the eldest male wields authority over the females and the children. It is simply a world of men which has been engaging in discriminating against, exploiting and oppressing the females. Sylvia Walby in her book *Theorizing Patriarchy* mentions that patriarchy is a social structure and practices in which men dominate, exploit, and oppress women. She also identifies two types of patriarchy: private and public patriarchy (24). Patriarchy is all about power relations between men and women and it is where men control women's sexuality; it enforces the stereotypical masculinity in a society which tightens the unequal power relations between men and women. This chapter titled 'Critiquing Patriarchal Society' is conscious of patriarchal forms of society in the West and the East but tries to give a reasoned view of patriarchy in modern Indian society in the light of Indira Goswami's *The Blue Necked God*, Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *The Hour Before Dawn*, and Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata*.

Undoubtedly, Mamoni Raisom Goswami is one of the important figures in Assamese literature. Her writings reflect the social issues like the widow's remarriage, women exploitations, the domination of the upper-class people especially the Brahminical class or

some holy institutions as the *Satras* in the post-independence era. Among other issues of society like animal sacrifice, caste system etc. she, in all her works, emphasises women empowerment and tries to challenge the existing Brahminical norms. Mamoni Raison Goswami, though born in a Brahmin family, does not like the Brahmin orthodox rules. She through her writings and speeches tries to challenge the existing rigid norms of the society.

*The Blue Necked God* is a reflection of Mamoni Raison Goswami's inner anguish against the patriarchal Brahmin society as well as the conventional society of Brindavan, in Uttar Pradesh. In this novel she shows the utter exploitation of the poverty-stricken widows in Brindavan where the widows or the usually called *radheshyamis* are devoted their life to the worship of Lord Krishna. As a feminist the position of Mamoni Raison Goswami is very much significant because in all her novels and short stories she not only tries to challenge the patriarchal society by showing the inhuman side of the phallogocentric order through her lifelike characters but also shows the possible ways in which everyone, in terms of gender, can get equal status in the society. *The Blue Necked God* is perhaps the first Assamese novel which exposes the dark side of Brindavan. In *The Blue Necked God*, Saudamini is the central character, who is the victim of the patriarchal society. Through Saudamini, Goswami projects a woman who demands and struggles for her freedom in particular and also for all the widows who are the victims of the patriarchal society in general. How the young widow Saudamini is treated by her own parents is the very significant theme in this novel. Goswami's perception of Brindavan completely changed when she was doing her research on the *Ramayana* under the supervision of Upendra Lekharu. Preeti Gill says of Indira Goswami:

...to me she was very much a feminist writer stating her views strongly and effectively in story after story and engaging with the social injustices and the inequalities she encountered. (Goswami 121)

Indira Goswami's writing deals with the social injustices which have been basically incorporated with the exploitations of the poor by the powerful people in the society. She raises questions, like how can a woman get her utmost self-fulfillment in a society where she is suppressed by a large number of restrictions imposed by social custom, religion and who is fearful of the social norms in every step of her life? Can a woman live alone in this world without the dependence of their male counterparts? Thus, Mamoni Raisom Goswami's feminist perspectives give a new dimension to the Assamese novel. In the introduction of *The Blue Necked God*, Aruni Kashyap observes, "The descriptions of the architectural ruins in *The Blue Necked God* are extended by the narration of anecdotes about the bloody history of Brindavan" (x). This above mentioned line exposes the harsh history of Brindavan where the young widows are not called *bidhovas*<sup>11</sup> but *radheshyamis*, and they devoted their life to worship Lord Krishna. The living styles of the radheshyamis are too pathetic because they are not given the full freedom like the other females; they are alienated as they are considered evil because of the untimely deaths of their husbands.

The novels of Bhabendra Nath Saikia, like Goswami, also deal with the prevalent issues of the Assamese society. Though the society is moving with time and technology, still there is lack of awareness in many parts of Assam. Even in the twentieth century, people are victimised in the name of superstitious beliefs like witch hunting, conventional traditional norms like a male child is more important than a girl child etc. Saikia's literary creations almost touch every aspect of the Assamese society and he tries to give moral lessons. He through this novels, dramas, and short stories present the readers a lifelike picture of a true Assamese society.

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<sup>11</sup>In Assamese a widow is called *bidhova*

In *The Hour Before Dawn* Bhabendra Nath Saikia basically portrays the male domination over the female and the female's responses to the male injustices. Through his novels and other literary works, he shows that women are not passive or inferior to men but it is the patriarchal society, the stereotypical parameters of which force women to suppress their anger, fear, anxiety, and unfulfilled dreams. In this novel it has been observed that despite the patriarchal constraints how the females challenge the male-centric world.

Menoka is the central character in this novel *The Hour Before Dawn* whose husband Mohikanta is a middle-class businessman, with the male patriarch attitude. Despite his good married life relationship with Menoka, who has four children fathered by him, he remarries a girl, Kiron who is too younger than him. He remarries Kiron without the consent of his first wife, Menoka. It is terrible to see that in a patriarchal society a man can do whatever he wants, but if it happens with a married woman or a widow, she will be discriminated, and alienated, and the society will not allow her to participate in social activities. In this novel, *The Hour Before Dawn* Saikia very courageously talks about women's oppression, cruelties in a patriarchal society. Along with that, through the character and the actions of Menoka, Saikia tries to show the bold nature of women and how women should behave in a patriarchal society not be subordinated in the hands of men. When Mohikanta remarries his second wife, even his old parents did not protest. Instead, Menoka's mother-in-law consoles Menoka and blames her destiny:

Please don't blame us, dear. The Divine one shall judge this. To be humiliated like this at our age by someone I have borne... we are trying to keep our eyes and ears closed and shut this out. Why did the Divine One not open His eyes and remove us from here before he showed us this day? I know not what sin we have committed, my dear. (17)

Along with the patriarchal theme in the novel *The Hour Before Dawn* it depicts the class structure of the orthodox society which moves with power that is invested in male patriarchs. It is increasingly apparent that Patriarchy subjugates and dominates women and deprives them of their power and rights as well. In India a woman's life is basically meant for marriage and procreation. To some extent, marriage increases the power of a woman, gives her an identity, but ultimately she has to undergo exploitation and subordination under patriarchal structure. In this novel *The Hour Before Dawn* Saikia critiques the practice of marriage particularly in the male patriarchal society where man like Mohikanta exercises his power over Menoka.

The writings of Tilottoma Misra, like Indira Goswami and Bhabendra Nath Saikia, deals with issues including women's problem in the pre and post-Independent Assam. Her novel *Swarnalata* is a great work with regards to its themes and contexts. As a novelist and an academician, Misra tries to remove all the superstitious beliefs and orthodox norms from the society. The basic themes of this novel are women empowerment, female education, and widow remarriage. This novel also tries to liberate the people of Assam from the traditional rigid thoughts.

Tilottoma Misra tries to trace the identity of a woman in the pre and post-Independent Assam, and how an identity matters for a woman to survive in that particular society. Tora, Lakhipriya, and Swarnalata are the central characters in this novel through which Misra highlights the conventional issues of the society. Swarnalata is the daughter of Gunabhiram Borua and Bishnupriya Roy and she is a free mind and wants an equal society for all. But it is from Swarnalata's parents that she has learned the values of Brahmo Samaj, an institution which tries to remove the evil customs from the society. Gunabhiram Borua decides to take Panchanan Sarma as a tutor for his daughter Swarnalata. But Panchanan Sarma is not as much a liberal as Gunabhiram Borua. It is because Panchanan Sarma thinks that:



Whatever little education is needed to read the Ramayana and the Mahabharata could easily be given to a girl by her own parents. After all, a girl who would very soon be given away in marriage and sent off to another home needed to be taught domestic skills like cooking and weaving instead of wasting time in teaching her mathematics and grammar.(13)

This reflects the mindset of the nineteenth-century people of Assam. Apart from the physical and emotional domination of the women, the patriarchal society also hinders their education which is a fundamental right to every citizen of India. Tilottoma Misra's writings convey a message of reformation in the Assamese society. In the article "Social Criticism in Nineteenth-Century Assamese Writing: The Arunodoi" (1985) Gunabhiram Barua advocates that "only when women are educated and emancipated can they be the true companions for men"(Misra 1563). In this novel, Misra shows the orthodox mindset of the people of tribal villages. When Gunabhiram Borua goes on an official visit to a tribal village, the villagers mistakenly take him for a missionary and they request him not to establish any girls' school in the village. They think that:

The few young men of the village who had gone to school had lost interest in their fields. Now if the girls too started going to school, who would manage the housework (Misra 43).

In the typical Assamese society as stated in Misra's *Swarnalata*, people think that women are only designated to maintain the household things. It is the stereotypical and patriarchal belief that women are always inferior, weak, and subordinate. Patriarchy is so handicapped that it does not consider other possibility. If women are educated, they will become literate mothers who can impart knowledge to their children, and moreover an understanding housewife who can run the household properly.

A patriarchal society by and large is a social institution which secures institutional authority to male members. So by nature of functioning, it oppresses and neglects women as inferior and mateable. In the Western world, criticism of this social structure arose in late nineteenth century in a more concerted manner and became a social movement by the mid - twentieth century. Critical influences and feminist struggles reach out to the most corners of the world in this century. It is assumed that criticism of patriarchy is a newly invigorating movement in Indian writings, though portrayals of women's exploitation are not unknown in India beforehand. In three novels of Indira Goswami's *The Blue Necked God*, Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *The Hour Before Dawn* and Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata* it is found that patriarchal thought and values are deeply rooted in many parts of India including Assam. It is the patriarchy which never concerns itself about women issues and their needs. Besides, there is revolt by the main characters against the orthodox patriarchal society in the novels of *The Hour Before Dawn* and *Swarnalata*.

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**CHAPTER III:**

**Woman's Activism in Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *The Hour Before Dawn***



## Chapter III

**Woman's Activism in Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *The Hour Before Dawn***

Bhabendra Nath Saikia is a prominent literary figure in Assam, whose literary works deal with the everyday life of the Assamese people. He came on to the scene at a time when the Assamese society was infested with superstition and other conventional orthodoxy. In most of his literary works such as *Srinkal* (1976), *Moromor Deuta* (1998) and film narratives that would follow, women stand at the center and play a very significant role. The main purpose of his women centric theme is to produce social criticism against the conservative male attitude towards women. Saikia's critical position in this context seems close to the feminists' examination of patriarchal societies.

*Antareep* (2007), one of his significant novels, has been translated into English as *The Hour Before Dawn* (2009) by Maitreyee Siddhanta Chakravarty. Lilabati Bora Saikia appreciates the Assamese name of this novel *Antareep* which means the cape. It signifies the abandoned area in Menoka's heart when she was neglected by her husband after spending eleven years with her. Menoka gets fulfillment when she acts and expresses her own desire and freedom to Modon. Maitreyee Siddhanta Chakravarty, the translator of the novel *Antareep*, does not break the motif of the original Assamese version. The name *The Hour Before Dawn* is very significant because firstly, it depicts the darker side of patriarchy like the hour before dawn symbolizes the darker part of the night. Secondly, Mohikanta brings his second wife Kiron at the time before dawn, which causes the changes in Menoka's life as Saikia depicts "the moment before dawn. Menoka, startled by a distant birdcall, sensed a sinking feeling in her heart"(19). This time is very important for the development of the story

as well as for Menoka because she evolves to become a rebellious and bold natured woman. Thirdly, the title *The Hour Before Dawn* symbolises the time when Modon and Menoka meet secretly to consummate in the jungle where she finds her sexual liberation. In this novel, Saikia portrays Menoka as the central character who fights against the injustices of the patriarchal society. Mohikanta, the husband of Menoka, remarries a girl without the consent of Menoka or his parents. Through the character Mohikanta, Saikia projects the power of masculinity which plays a vital role in a society. It is his power, associated with wealth and social status that he uses in order to remarry even though he already has a wife and four children. Menoka in her sad, brooding moments wonders:

She had given her husband four children, had bared her body and soul to him... why did he want to remarry? Today what made him dress in a new silk kurta, become a bridegroom once again, and leave on an elephant –back to take another woman as his wife? (10)

Menoka, as a wife, gives everything to Mohikanta. The question arises, what encourages Mohikanta to marry another girl when he is already married? If this kind of activity was adopted by Menoka, she would be penalised by the society. But surprisingly, no one questions Mohikanta's power; this is because of his wealth and his high status. The entire society just keeps silent and approves his arrogant action. This is totally an act of injustice to Menoka and to women in general because Mohikanta betrays, ignores and neglects her after living together for eleven years.

Marriage, as a social institution in Assam, sanctions an identity to a woman and also assigns patriarchal controls over her. In the patriarchal society, after marriage, a newlywed girl has to bear the whole household responsibility, and the rest of the family members expect her to meet every expectation on all occasions. In a similar case elsewhere in Europe, *The*

*Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir states “marriage is an obscene bourgeois institution” (33) and it sounds true even to the novel *The Hour Before Dawn*. Mohikanta, as a wealthy man, is respected and adored by every villager and he takes advantage of this. He first married Menoka but after several years, he now wants to marry Kiron, a girl from a poor family. It is interesting that Mohikanta gifts a large amount of money to Kiron’s parents so that they could yield under his wealth and power. Similarly Simone De Beauvoir argues that in western societies, marriage depends, to a great extent, on money and power and if a man has power and money then the girl’s parents will willingly give their daughters to that person (133). But the situation or the problems that a girl will face after the marriage is no one’s concern. Similarly, in the case of Menoka, no one really cares to conjecture what her position might be once she is married. All anyone ever really cares about is marrying her off to a rich powerful man. After marrying Kiron, Mohikanta abandons her and their four children, and lives in another house. Thus, marriage becomes a tool of the patriarchal society to reduce women as objects of enjoyment.

Bhabendra Nath Saikia, as a film maker, similarly projects the suffering and the pathetic conditions of the Assamese people. His women characters are drawn from the rural ambience. They learn how women should be treated particularly in a family and a society in general. Saikia is aware that the films, short stories, novels and other literary genres are the significant modes of knowledge which enlighten even the most illiterate about the realities of Assamese women - their exploitation and suppression. In his novels and films, he projects the women protagonists in such a way that the whole society keeps an eye on them and their movement. As a male author and as a film director his creative ability to understand the emotional as well as psychological feelings of a woman is praiseworthy. For example the novel *The Hour Before Dawn*, his film like *Kolahal* (1988), and *Itihaas* (1996) represent the realistic picture of victimised women in the patriarchal society. In *Kolahal*, it is seen that

Kiron is abandoned by her husband Binod. Binod leaves her and son Moti under the pretext of searching for a job. But later Kiron came to know that her husband is a fraud and has many wives and children. And Kiron's subsequent life becomes so pathetic that she allows her son Moti to collect rice in the rice fields, which results in the accidental death of Moti. After the death of Moti, she feels alienated and the society starts discriminating her as she is solely responsible for the death of her own son. The patriarchal society is so cruel towards women that even in such situation, Kiron has no one to help and console her. Instead, they accuse her as a sinner. The film also raises the question of the responsibilities of a man towards his spouse. Kiron's husband Binod is shown to have failed to take the responsibilities for his family. Though he is a fraud, no one in that society speaks against him. However, if Kiron had acted in the same fashion as that of her husband, she would have been punished or forced to leave her husband's house. Here it is found that, Saikia's literary creation is very much justifiable from the feminist's point of view. In the film *Itihaas*, Saikia also depicts how the women are suppressed and exploited by men. Lakhimi, the protagonist as a part time maid in an upper class family where she faces the mental and physical exploitation which leads her to commit suicide by jumping into a well (Dutta 136).

During the 1980s issues of gender equality emerged vividly in Assam. In that period, many women writers like Anuradha Sarma Pujari, Nilima Dutta, Nirupama Borgohain emerged and their writings projected how a woman should be treated and how they should revolt against the injustices of the patriarchal society. Nirupama Borgohain's novel *Anya Jiban* (1986) (translated literally as *Another Life*) projects two kinds of women. One is submissive and docile represented by Anima, whereas the other one is rebellious and active represented by Putali. Borgohain depicts Putali as a reformed woman in *Anya Jiban* while Bhabendra Nath Saikia portrays Menoka as a radical and rebellious woman in *The Hour Before Dawn*. In the novel *Anya Jiban* Anima is very submissive, she accepts everything,

even when her husband Manoj remarries another woman. Putali in the same novel hates all males after having seen her father torturing her mother. She later realizes that it is not only the males that are responsible for the discrimination and oppression of women, but also the stereotypical social values that resist new liberal ideas and values. Until and unless social taboos and superstitions are discarded, people will not be changed.

Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* that men are able to mystify women and this mystification helps a lot in the formation of a patriarchal society (588). Stereotypical norms and mystification are the main instruments of the patriarchal society. In *The Hour Before Dawn*, it is seen that mystification affects Menoka and Kiron's life where they are under the impression that Mohikanta would be a very kind hearted man as he has wealth, property and high status in the society. But later, both of them realise that they are trapped by Mohikanta. It is very unfortunate that women, too, appropriate the stereotypical norms and values that work against their interests because by accepting these norms and values they are rendered helpless on their own consent. In western societies, it has been seen that before marriage woman first understands herself and becomes self-reliant. In this context, one may recall Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) in which Nora represents a liberal feminist mind. Nora thinks that she has become a person before her marriage or before being a mother. She comes into her own and stands up to counter her husband on the question of equal responsibilities and gender equalities, she decides to reject the patriarchal order and walks out of the house to live as a free person (60). Nora's understanding is appreciable from the feminist point of view. If any woman sees or understands her in-law's society before marriage she would not become the victim of that society and no one can mystify them.

The patriarchal society controls the identity of a woman, which is a universal phenomenon, as feminist critics see. A woman is constructed by the society and she is being criticized for her liberal attitudes which are different from the rigid traditional roles. To

become a good woman, along with the nature of her character and behaviour the question of virginity before marriage is also come to the forefront (Persaud). In the patriarchal societies a woman, as a mother, a daughter, or a girl is expected to remain silent within the rigid boundaries of the society. If she has sexual encounters, or if she is raped, the victim is subjected to criticism (Hetu 20). For instance, once a girl is raped no one comes forward to marry her and everyone considers her as if she were responsible for the unwanted event of rape. The society is so cynical that it allows the rapist and the cruel male to enjoy the social freedom. In a male dominated society, the fallen women who are the victims of the patriarchal violence or those who challenges the rigid traditional values and principles very rarely find a respectable position in the society. The “victim blaming” practice is playing in this context where everyone questioning the victim as she is responsible for sexual violence (Thacker 91). Beauvoir states that “one is not born – rather becomes, woman” under such social orders. (14)

It is a common knowledge by now that the male dominated society decides the character of women and fixes certain stringent rules which must be followed by every woman in her life. The moral virtue and chastity are considered the two main qualities through which a woman's nature is decided. If she fails to show these qualities or abide by the norms and taboos of the society, she will be punished and would not be allowed to take part in any social activity. Menoka in *The Hour Before Dawn* came to realise that the injustices which are done against her can only be met by challenging the existing traditional norms and values. The narrator says:

What really mattered was that she was beginning to discover hidden strengths within herself. After all these years in this house, she had found the courage to step out on her own... She was starting to take an interest in the working of the mill... yes, things

were changing and the changes would continue! Someday, Mohikanta and his atrocities...(63)

The atrocities and injustices of Mohikanta against his first wife are known to everyone and no one raises questions against him. Menoka understands the patriarchal society and its values. And she realises the hidden strength within herself. Therefore, she plans to change the prevailing norms of the society. What she could not find with her husband Mohikanta, now she finds with Modon, a lower class person. She challenges the society by developing a secret love relationship with Modon, and she becomes pregnant. At the same time it is Mohikanta's male patriarchal attitudes which makes ignore, neglect and abandon Menoka. She plans to give back the same pain and anxiety to Mohikanta that she is undergoing. Thus, Menoka is able to teach a lesson to Mohikanta, her husband. She clearly intends to inflict similar pain upon Mohikanta and says triumphantly:

You had elephants, you had drums and music, so you could fetch a woman and make her the mother of your child right before my eyes. I have nothing, I have done whatever I with my limited resources. It's the same thing. Now tolerate the situation as best as you can. May the realization eat into you. (132)

Through Mohikanta, Saikia tries to show the egocentric nature of the male in post Independence Assam. The patriarchs arrogantly do whatever they want to do without paying the least heed towards their family and the society in general. From the feminist point of view, it is totally unjust that women's freedom and will are restricted, whereas a man gets all the space in society to exercise his wishes. The woman performs within the borders set by men. In *Sexual Politics* (1970) Millett rightly remarks how the concepts of masculinity and femininity are fixed in such a way that women are made to speak up those patriarchal values and norms. She further points out that these male-constructed ideas extend the biological

distinctions of men and women, which signify different roles for different sexes (84). For instance, the masculine is considered as powerful and dominant, while feminine is something which is weak, submissive and always subordinated to the masculine. These are stereotypical thoughts that have been circulated generation after generation. Menoka's extramarital relationship with Modon is an example of a challenge to the patriarchal society and the traditional norms and values. Saikia's other films like *Anirban* (1980) shows how the patriarchy dominates the women's desires and aspirations. Here, the film *Anirban* is centered on Nisha, the fourth daughter of Rajani and Bhagyabati. When Nisha reaches her adolescence, she falls in love with her tutor and his father disapproves this love relationship and stops the tuition classes. The unfruitful love affair affects Nisha from within which leads her to fall sick and at last she takes her last breath. Similarly, in the film *Sandhyarag* (1977) Bhabendra Nath Saikia portrays the atrocities of the middle class urban people where the rural young women like Taru and Charu get physical and mental tortures in the phallogocentric society.

Evelyn Berger Miller, in her book *Triangle: A Betrayed Wife* (1971) states that the rejected wife is always trying to answer back to her husband's earlier misdeeds, and as such she commits herself to the same ethical misdeeds as that of her husband (28). In the same way, Menoka wants to take revenge on Mohikanta by having an extramarital love relationship with Modon. According to some critics, it is a befitting reply to her husband because he has already done injustice and betrayed her by marrying Kiron. She takes a vow that she will live with her four children, and they are her only hope after Mohikanta deserts her. Lilabati Bora Saikia comments on the character Menoka in her article "Bhabendra Nath Saikia Upanyas", she contends that the occurrences that happen in the life of Menoka transform her from a loving, calm and sensitive woman to a bold, aggressive and a rebellious character who develops herself during the course of the novel *The Hour Before Dawn*. (Saikia 561)



Menoka's transgression is more significant from the feminist's perspectives. Every woman has her own dreams and emotions and she always thinks of fulfilling those. But in the male dominated society the woman does not get sufficient space to attain her goals. In this novel, Menoka, by developing an extramarital affair with Modon and also having her fifth child fathered by Modon shows that women can be strong and decide independently. They acquire some kind of emotional and psychological attachment to their husbands after the marriage, which suits their conjugal life. But, they do not want to be the victim of male desire. What they seek is freedom, peace and security in their life. Menoka speaks to Modon:

I feel really good when you are around, but' – her eyes scanned the horizon – please go stay there tonight too. When you're here, I feel both peaceful and restless. (93)

From these lines, it can be assumed that Menoka never wants a man like Mohikanta, who is too dominant, aggressive and sometimes violent. On the other hand, Menoka finds Modon humble and calm and she is successful in exercising her own will when they are engaging in sexual intercourse. Her generosity and modesty with the surrounding people of the society, and her capacity to control the whole house by herself is flawless in that society. Because she wants to keep their illicit relation secret from public view. No one has any reason to suspect her. Saikia very creatively projects the character Menoka, who during the development of the novel reveals change in her attitude and nature.

There are also many authors, poets, novelists who write against the cruelties of the male patriarchal society in India. For example, in Kamala Das's poem *The Stone Age* (1973) depicts how a woman revolts against her husband's neglect of her person and establishes an extramarital relationship. She writes:

You build round me a shabby room

And stroke my pitted face absent mindly while

You read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-mourning sleep

You stick a finger into my dreaming eye.

...I ran up the forty

Noisy steps to knock at another's door. (65)

Kamala Das metaphorically explains how the husband tortures his wife. The husband neglects and ignores her and disturbs her in an inappropriate way. It has been observed that the dissatisfaction of a woman turns against the traditional orders of the society and consequently it results in maintaining an extramarital relationship. N. Iyer in his book *Musing on Indian Writing in English* (2005) speaks on the violences on women – that the separation between the husband and the wife and the process in which they are unable to make their love fruitful and this leads the wife to search for a new partner of her own with whom she can find solace and ultimate attachment. The situation of Menoka in *The Hour Before Dawn* and the protagonist of Kamala Das's poem *The Stone Age* are similar. Both these women are neglected, and ignored by their male counterparts. In Menoka's case after having four children, and after enjoying a good conjugal life, how could Mohikanta leave her and want to marry another woman? It seems that he has no respect for Menoka. Thus, the feminist writers emerge to dig out the injustices that have been done to women from generation to generation.

Saikia, through this literary creation, tries to give a space to women who otherwise have been too oppressed to speak or revolt against the cruelties of the patriarchal society. The feminist writers and thinkers actually look at the problems faced by women deeply and try to find some solutions. In *The Hour Before Dawn* Saikia understands the pathetic situations of women and as such portrays that situation through Menoka in his novel.

Modon and Dhruva, Menoka's son from Modon are an important part in Menoka's life. They are also responsible for making Mohikanta numb till the last moment of his life.

Saikia not only uses the female characters to rise against the patriarchy, but he has also made some male characters such as Modon who raises silently against the injustices. Modon states:

Somehow you happened to wake up, or you would have known nothing of this. We are deeply pained by what has happened, Nobou. We are not capable of great deeds, but we could not let Mohikanta Kakaiti get away scot-free. So we decided – if the man can like this because of his money, power alone, then why not take away from him? ...we could think no other option (58).

Modon in a way supports Menoka and it seems from the above mentioned quote that Menoka got inspiration from Modon to go against her husband. Though Modon works in the mill of Mohikanta, he does not like Mohikanta's decision to remarry another woman. Saikia also is critical in presenting the character Modon because he is a minor character in the novel he plays as the catalyst of Menoka's action to her husband. What Saikia, through Modon, tries to project is that though the conventional, orthodox values are deeply rooted in the rural society of Assam, yet the orthodox thoughts could not have manipulated all the males in that society. Modon is a true example of that as he strongly disagrees and condemns the injustices done against Menoka. It is worth mentioning that Saikia does not reveal whether Modon is equally excited and enjoying the adultery with Menoka. On the other hand, Menoka was born in a family in which she was told about the spiritual and mythological tales of great, bold and violent ladies like "Sita, Sabitri, Damayanti..." (126). She grew up in a family and learned how to conform to the patriarchy through the stories of Sita, Sabitri, and Damayanti. Saikia surprisingly does not make any comment on Menoka's actions against her husband. He keeps a space for his readers to raise the question of whether or not Menoka's revenge on Mohikanta is justifiable. For a reader of neutral observation, the story is a dramatization of injustice and lack of morality. The novelist Saikia has explicitly presents the woman's point of view, but the moral viewpoint would not support the woman's transgression which is

secretly committed. In this narrative the society overtly shows the patriarch's violation of a sacred relationship, but the female commits a similar wrong, though in secret. Menoka takes revenge, but keeps it a secret conspiratorially. She does not make her protest public. Thus, she does not emerge as a social or moral revolutionary, though the fact lies that Saikia's story uncovers a silent revolution in women's world. Her radical move may be appropriated by women who want to write their own equal destiny in a patriarchal society. She abandons the ancient traditions and heritage of Sita, Sabitri, etc and thus emerges as a modern radical self, a resistant voice within the family.

From the feminist point of view, there is nothing wrong with Menoka and her illicit relationship with Modon. She has given a befitting return to her husband Mohikanta. If a man like Mohikanta can marry a woman without the consent of his first wife after eleven years and four children why can Menoka, a woman, not do the same? In the post Independence Assam, it has been seen that the Brahmin community regulates many parts of the Assamese society to maintain their supreme status (Kalita 65). They stipulate some restrictions on widows' remarriage, promote child marriage etc. Some of the women like Menoka never want to live under the shadow of others or within the existing values and norms. There are many writers in India like Rabindranath Tagore who empowers women by showing the bold, aggressive nature of women. In Bengali literature, it is Rabindranath Tagore who in poetry and short stories shows the typical realities of the Bengali society. In his short story, *The Woman's Letter* (1934) Tagore depicts the plight of a woman, Mrinal, who, after spending fifteen years with her husband realizes her exploitations and introspects herself. She thought that she could attain her fulfillment in life, not as a wife but as a woman. She realises her identity as a woman instead of a wife who is conventionally more dependent on her husband and the family as well. Her bold and aggressive thinking leads her to leave her husband's

home for good and stays in Puri, a holy place in Odisha. From Puri, she writes several letters to her husband. Her anguish and realisations are truly reflected in these letters. She writes:

After fifteen years, standing before the sea, I have known today that I also have another relationship with the world and the Almighty. That is why I have the courage to write to you this letter and it is not from the second daughter-in-law in your family.  
(Saha 32)

Mrinal, the housewife in a Bengali family becomes mentally and emotionally strong and finds her identity as a woman and become more than a subordinate wife. Every woman wants freedom before and after her marriage. It is expected by the society that as wife a woman should follow certain orders and has to maintain a life within the conventional social structure. Mrinal sees that being a woman is broader than being a wife. The only aspect of being a wife is to satisfy the husband or to take care of the family but, on the other hand, being woman, one can enjoy her life as an independent individual without depending on others. Like Menoka in Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *The Blue Necked God*, Mrinal, with her new self-awareness which is not purely on spiritual but also against societal bondage, moves to challenge the patriarchal Bengali society, and it results in leaving her husband's home and finds some space to express her self identity in Puri. She ridicules the society by saying :

Where are the walls built by masons and where are the barbed-wire fences of your domestic rules? With what humiliation and distress can it still keep the human spirit imprisoned? (32)

Like Menoka, Mrinal develops from a submissive, calm woman to a violent, aggressive, and bold woman. She criticises the rigid societal patriarchal parameters and orders that have rendered women like her to become victims. When the victimised woman turns against the injustices, she is considered as an evil character. For instance, Menoka in

*The Hour Before Dawn* takes the role of a rebel and boldly pay back her husband Mohikanta's injustices. Assamese critic Hiren Gohain has a different perspective and holds that the secret consummation of Menoka and Modon reduces the status of Menoka. Gohain further thinks that the illicit affair of Menoka degrades her moral status, which she has acquired from being the wife of Mohikanta (Gohain 80).

The feminist advocates would naturally question if there are a different set of rules and regulations for the woman which men would care to abide by their own set. When men and women are essentially equal limbs of the society, the laws are to be equally advantageous for both men and women. The societal mindset has to be changed from the orthodox conservative attitude to a more liberal, open minded mindset.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, it can be said that the dominant and oppressive nature of the males in the traditional society may come from the psychological insecurity of not being able to produce a child (Tandon 146). In *The Blue Necked God*, Menoka has four children with Mohikanta. Even in the Western context, Simone De Beauvoir has to sarcastically uncover the hidden dynamics of reproduction, which patriarchy pushes for the women to appropriate. She states that when women are getting older, they gradually lose the reproductive capacity and as such loses her identity and the primary purpose of being a wife (640). Besides, Menoka, the housewife as well as a mother, remains always under pressure with her four kids. So, it is also very much natural on her part to lose her yearning to have more children. On the other hand, Mohikanta still possesses the biological urges which moves him to bring a substitute. The feminists pose a question that after living with Menoka for eleven years how Mohikanta could neglect and ignore her. He has money, power, and societal status so he can easily get a beautiful bride like Kiron. But Mohikanta does not even think for a while what will happen to Menoka's life and their four children if he abandons. Sometimes Menoka introspects and questions herself that what inspires him to remarry:

In baring herself, had Menoka emptied herself out? Had she become barren just by giving birth to four children? What did she do wrong – why did the man never, not once, give her a hint? Mohikanta was marrying again – why did she have to hear about it from old Reboti? (40)

It is obviously an injustice to Menoka, that Mohikanta did not say anything in his decision to remarry. Menoka tries to give a lesson to her husband Mohikanta, by developing a secret sexual relationship with Modon the servant. She is bold and challenges the patriarchal society by claiming that if a man can take a decision by himself why can not a woman make decisions by herself. In the novel, *The Hour Before Dawn* when Mohikanta first comes to know that Menoka is going to give birth to a child, he becomes shocked, “jumping outside and screaming out with his arms raised, his fists clenched – but he could scarcely move” (123). He knows that Menoka is having an extramarital relationship with someone, and this is an act of resistance to the power that oppresses her. When he summons Menoka to the mill to explain how this happens, Menoka explains and silences his male egotism :

That is why I’m telling you, you should discuss these things at home when everyone is around. I am your wife; you had four children, now you have five. Soon there will be six. Everyone will know we are living in harmony, that you still treat me as your wife. Isn’t that nice? ... Otherwise, people will think you have abandoned me, although we live in the same house. No one can blame you anymore. (131)

From the feminist point of view Mohikanta is certainly guilty of marrying another woman in spite of the existence of his first wife. Mohikanta could have divorced Menoka but he did not because he might think that the separation would diminish his societal status, power and question his masculinity as well. But if his character is neutrally judged, it can be said that he has shown respect to Kiron by marrying her and thus giving the social

recognition to her as his wife. Instead of marrying Kiron, he could have gone through an illicit relationship with her secretly as he has immense wealth and power. But he chooses to give Kiron the dignity of being his wife. In this way it can be said that Mohikanta has a certain respect for women.

Menoka knows that Mohikanta does not have guts to accuse her in front of all the family members including his parents. By doing this he will invite ridicules from the society and degrade his own position. It is because he has done injustice to Menoka by remarrying Kiron. Thus, it is Menoka's plan to get pregnant so as to teach Mohikanta how painful an act of betrayal can be. Saikia's depiction of both Mohikanta and Menoka is interesting from the feminist perspectives. He narrates *The Hour Before Dawn* in such a way to expose how women are being treated in a phallogentric society and how a woman should challenge the values and orthodox orders of the patriarchal society.

What a woman needs is an identity and some space to express herself beyond the four walls of a conservative society. In *The Hour Before Dawn*, though Mohikanta marries two women they do not get the opportunity to speak up against Mohikanta as he does not pay any attention to their psychological and emotional needs. Instead of understanding the wives' needs and emotions he uses them for his own pleasure. But, unlike Mohikanta, Modon is different. For instance, the narrator says that Menoka finds love in Modon which she does not find in Mohikanta for eleven years :

Here was a man she could send for whatever she pleased. He would come and stand before her with lowered hand. She could command him this very moment – come, Modon, kneel before me. And he would obey her unconditionally. (82)

According to Kate Millet, the women can be liberated only when the society eliminates the rigid norms and societal taboos that have been constructed by the males



(Tandon 44). In a follow-up to Millett's radical subversion, one may raise a question regarding Indian patriarchy: how long will women be suppressed, oppressed and exploited? When will they be free from all the imposed taboos and consider themselves as liberated? If the woman can no longer tolerate the existing norms and somehow tries to challenge the patriarchal thought, she will be considered a renegade. In the novel, *The Hour Before Dawn*, Saikia portrays Menoka as someone who tries to fight against her dominant husband's atrocities and neglect in particular and for the condition of women in general. Menoka's extramarital love relationship with Modon, a man from the lower community is nothing but a revenge motif in the story and though she is rebellious she keeps her secret from the villagers except Modon and her eldest son Indro. On the other hand, to Compare Menoka with other women like Raboti and Kiron in the novel *The Hour Before Dawn*, all are very submissive and docile and ready to do whatever the society dictates.

We can draw a parallel between Menoka and Kate Chopin's protagonist, Edna Pontellier in the novel *The Awakening* (1899) even though the authors belong to different cultures, separated by continents and religious orders. In the patriarchal American society, women too are bound to hear the voice of the males, whereas the female voice and emotion are suppressed and not given any importance. Edna Pontellier, the protagonist rebels against the prevailing conventions of a male patriarchal American society (Kaplon 1). She is in search of an identity which signifies a restricted free identity and she discovers herself as a new woman who challenges all the barriers and norms which have suppressed the women for years. Being a woman, Kate Chopin experiences the patriarchal society where men portray the authoritative role. Edna Pontellier stands in the position where she is exhausted by the orthodox societal norms and beliefs. When on a vacation to Grand Isle, she assumes her strength as a woman rather than as a wife. The narrator relates the strong sound of the sea to the feelings and emotions of Edna Pontellier, the protagonist who is fed up with the last part

of the nineteenth century American society perpetuating its male hegemony (110). She lives in a “dual life”, one questions her existence in the society and the other argues her inward traumatic feelings (224). When she goes against the societal orders and disobeys the existing traditional norms she is considered mad by her husband (150). What Foucault mentions in his book *Madness and Civilization* (1961) is that the parameters by which one can be decided as ‘mad’ depends on the different cultural orders of a society (24). When Edna Pontellier disowns the traditional rules and ignores her daily household duties, she is termed mad. Like Menoka in *The Hour Before Dawn*, Edna establishes an extramarital relationship with Arobin and Robert only to show her disagreement and dissatisfaction with the particular society. Menoka in Saikia’s fiction and Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* subvert the existing societal norms and challenge the atrocities, suppressions, and oppression of the male patriarchal societies. Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* demonstrates the typical American orthodox society when a woman like Edna Pontellier is the victim at the hands of its male population. Bhabendra Nath Saikia in the novel *The Hour Before Dawn* portrays the same scene where Menoka, the protagonist is the victim who is neglected and ignored by her husband, Mohikanta. The things that are taking place in the lives of both the protagonist in these two novels simply depict their attitude towards the society where they cannot be their own selves because of the suppression suffer on account of their husbands and the society as well. Their extramarital relationships are nothing but ways to escape from the repressive societal orders.

The core differences between Edna Pontellier and Menoka are that the former cut off all the relations for her children as she thinks that her children would push her to that same society from which she is trying to get free from, and in *The Awakening* Edna commits suicide as a means of liberation from all the earthly things. She commits suicide only because she has been searching for freedom where a wife like her could find space to acknowledge

her emotional, physical and psychological needs. It also can be said that the reason for Edna's suicide is that she gets liberation from her husband by ignoring him or the societal beliefs, but what hurts her more is her deep attachments with her two children which she is trying to erase. Chopin tries to show that suicide is not the path to liberation from patriarchy. Bhabendra Nath Saikia's artistic vision is different from Kate Chopin's in the sense that he does not conceive suicide as a redemptive solution to life's problem or possibility of relief from the male patriarchal society. Saikia projects Menoka as an active, rebellious, and bold woman to stand by herself and to prove finally to the male world that the woman is no longer weak and can do very well without any male support. Menoka is more brilliant with her logic and has accurate awareness of her male cultural order and its loopholes. This cultural code binds the husband to guard the secrets of the family, just as marriage and the new birth are welcome as sacred events, and publicly celebrated. In such a society, the birth of a child is the husband's achievement. Menoka's steps radically puncture this pomposity of a male patriarchic order. Her rebellion brings down Mohikanta's narcissism, wealth and ethos that have, since ages, combined to establish this order. But Saikia's radicalism shines the most when Menoka's transgression, known only to her husband, is publicly presented as a success of parenthood. Her marital transgression is bold, a womanly innovative trick to answer the wrong doer on his own coin and at the same blindfolds the public scrutiny.

Unlike Kate Chopin's Edna Menoka does not cut off the attachment to her four children. She has deep attachment to her children, especially the eldest son Indro. In a letter to Indro who is studying in Kalkota, Menoka writes 'never forget how I have raised you' (239). Indro knows his father's arrogant and dominant nature and his mother's bold step to pay him back. Indro writes to her expressing his sympathy and solidarity with her:

How can I – those thoughts don't spare me even for few moments, no matter how hard I try to forget them. You know how you raised me, but you have no idea how I

grew up. I think of you all the time. I really love you all – but why did things have to turn out this way? (240)

It is Indro who helps Modon to steal his father's property from the mill. He also witnesses his mother's secret love relations with Modon. Indro's silences over his mother's extramarital relations signify his covert support for Menoka's rebellion against the brutal patriarchy. Indro does not ask any question about his mother's illegitimate affair. Menoka too accepts the things as it comes to her life. She is too bold in her stand that she could not confess her deeds and actions to her eldest son Indro. She says:

Keep your thoughts to yourself. Don't try to explain right and wrong, good and bad to me. What I have thought, what I have done, is right. I have said this before and I repeat myself now. If you think your mother has done something wrong, break all ties with her. I'd rather let go of you, than my principles. You can't make me budge even so much. (282-83)

At this point, one can recognise Menoka's mental strength which lets her confess about the deal to her eldest son Indro. She never blames herself for her secret relationship with Modon and their only child Dhurva.

Saikia, through his literary creations, tries to prove and portray the strength of women. *The Hour Before Dawn* is the best example of this. It is a novel where a submissive, obedient woman transgresses moral and social boundaries by projecting a violent, bold and rebellious female character who would otherwise never dare to establish an extramarital relationship with a lower class man, Modon. Saikia's intention in making such a bold character in the novel is to show that the male patriarchal societies should know how to treat the woman with respect. This chapter analyses the act of resistance by women of patriarchal society. There are

other issues equally relevant like revenge, loyalty, the absurd ideas of love and respect which are also incorporated in the narrative.

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**CHAPTER: IV**  
**The Forlorn Life of Widows in Misra and**  
**Goswami**



## CHAPTER: IV

### The Forlorn Life of Widows in Misra and Goswami

Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Tilottoma Misra are eminent literary figures, especially in Assamese Literature. The writings of both deal with the typical issues of Assam like the taboos, superstitions, women empowerment, and the widow remarriages. Some section of people of Assam, in the post- Independence era, stick to the conventional orthodox values which adversely affect the weaker sections in the society. This chapter attempts to analyse the plight and situations in which the widows struggle to survive and which are to be examined with special reference to Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *The Hour Before Dawn* and Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata*. Mamoni Raisom Goswami in *The Hour Before Dawn* explores the pathetic conditions of the *radheshyamis* in the holy place Brindavan in Uttar Pradesh and on the other hand Tilottoma Misra examines problems such as the widows remarriage and girls empowerment in the post - Independence Assam.

The widow is a constructed identity in a traditional society. After the death of a woman's spouse, the patriarchal society oppresses, exploits and even takes away all the right to survive in a society. Very few understand the physical, psychological, emotional troubles of a widow. It has been seen that widows are neglected by her family or in some cases by her children as they think that she is responsible for the death of her own husband and all upcoming evil for the family. The whole novel *The Blue Necked God* is developed around a widow's exploitation at Brindavan in Uttar Pradesh where the young widows converge from various parts of India because they want *Moksha* (ultimate liberation) so they devote themselves to serve Lord Krishna and the widows in Brindavan are known as *radheshyamis*.

What a young widow needs is a space to share her feelings and emotions with others. Moreover Goswami's depictions of *radheshyamis* are more steeped in pathos. She writes:

Give us some donation to keep us alive. You people live to eat, but we need to eat something in order to live. Give us something to keep us alive. (22)

According to Manu, a Hindu woman has to depend on someone from her childhood to death (Kosambi 38). For example, during a woman's childhood she has to depend on her father, after the marriage she is controlled by her husband and the family as well and in the old age, a woman has to depend to her children (Kosambi 38). It is a conventional notion among the male chauvinists that women are passive, submissive and cannot stand alone. The feminists fight by raising voices against this kind of attitude. They question that if a man can do whatever they want according to their will, why cannot a woman do the same? Though in the twentieth-century females go equally with their counterpart males, still some taboos and social orders prevail in some male dominated society.

The nineteenth century Assamese society is very much different from the current twenty first century in terms of belief systems and in terms of the way people think (Kosambi 38). The concept of patriarchy has been coming from the old scriptures and sacred texts (Chakravarti 597). For example, there are some Brahminical texts like *The Jatakas* (1957) and *Satapatha Brahmana* (1964) which give emphasis on the supremacy of male over the females (Chakravarti 585). The impact of Bengali Brahmanism which came to force during the reign of Ahom King Rudra Singha tightens the caste system which gives emphasis on the prohibition of the widow remarriage, less importance to the girls' education and many others (Misra 1559). The Brahmins are regarded as the high class and they control the whole society by their numerous thoughts and norms which are basically designated for the lower class or the marginalized people. Many intellectuals, thinkers and writers like Hemchandra Goswami,

Gunabhiram Barua, Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Birinchi Kumar Baruah enlighten the innocent and peace loving people of Assam to new cultural values and thoughts instead of practicing the old traditional orthodox societal orders. What they do is that they authored various Assamese journals like *Arunoudoi* (1846), *Junaki* (1889) and introduce new ideas, thoughts and principles to the people of Assam so that the people could know and be aware of their own culture.

In a male dominated society the voices of women get suppressed, since the society is controlled by the doctrines set by the male members of the population. In a patriarchal society, the silent woman loses freedom to express her identity (Gunenc 208). Child marriage is one of the evil practices in most of the patriarchal societies. Misra's novel *Swarnalata* raises questions about the importance of marriage of a girl child at a very young age. She writes through the character Gunabhiram Barua in the novel *Swarnalata* that:

Even the Shastras say that the girls be given the same education as boys. In ancient days, girls too were given the sacred thread and sent to the guru's place for receiving an education. This practice was given up only after the coming of child marriage. Had the almighty not wished that women have equal access to knowledge and wisdom as men, then perhaps he would have created them just like animals. In the advanced nations of the world educated women have written good books. If our womenfolk also acquire such knowledge, it would be beneficial to both the husband and the wife. (15)

Tilottoma Misra projects Gunabhiram Barua as an open minded, liberal man who is a believer of the Brahmo Samaj which opposes the conventional rigid norms of the society. The novel conveys the message of the evil side of child marriage and the equal treatment of both the males and the females. The patriarchal thought always emphasises that the marriage

is very much important for a woman through which she could attain *samskara*<sup>12</sup> (Kosambi 38). Actually, marriage is a trap in which the woman has to run her husband's household and no one ask her what she needs and desires. Child marriage is a terrible thing because a girl child is forced to get married with an unknown boy at the age of below fourteen which is the best time for a girl to acquire formal education but due to some chauvinist's monopolic norms she has to obey the elders' decision of marrying at an early age. In the novel *Swarnalata*, Panchanan Sarma being an educated, intelligent person arranges her daughter Lakhi's marriage at an early age. This shows that though the people of Assam are well educated and knowledgeable still they cling to their own traditional society and believe in the taboos wholeheartedly. Regarding the outcomes of child marriage Gunabhiram Barua speaks:

If the age difference between the two was a big one, then the relationship between the husband and the wife became more like that of a father and daughter. They would not be able to develop the friendship and affection of equals and this would result in complications in their family life. (48)

What Gunabhiram Barua tries to say is that a girl should attain maturity before her marriage. According to him if there are vast age differences between the bride and the groom, their married life would not be fruitful (48). In Assam, as a leader of Brahmo Samaj Barua brings a radical change particularly into the marriage of the Hindus in the novel where child marriage is strictly prohibited. In the novel *Swarnalata* it is also illustrated that Devendranath first arranges his daughter's marriage in the Brahmo fashion (40). Misra depicts the dark side of child marriage through the character of Lakhi, who is the daughter of Panchanan Sarma. In some patriarchal society child marriage has deeply rooted even becomes an integral part of that traditional society where intellectual, educated man like Panchanan Sarma could not

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<sup>12</sup>The process of attaining purification of an individual

escape from it. When Charushila Sen, a character in the novel *Swarnalata* sees Lakhi in white costumes, she immediately comments that it is “the sad outcome of a child marriage” (102).

The feminists’ point of view is that a patriarchal society forces a girl to get married at an early age, and when she becomes a widow due to the age difference between her husband and the wife, the same society accuses her of the death of her husband. When a woman becomes a widow resulting in her suffering, discrimination and neglect from the society, she tries to adopt a different way to live. For example, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (1885-1922), an Indian social activist, reformer who fights for women empowerment, becomes a widow after two years of her marriage and the whole mainstream Hindu society neglects her for being a widow which results in her conversion to the Christian religion (Kosombi 46). In the Christian religion, she finds enough space to represent her identity and to demonstrate her ability of teaching. According to her, traditional Hinduism assigns inferiority to Sudras and women whereas Christianity expounds “more convincing truth” (Kosombi 42). This new religion also helps her to establish some school. She is the founder of *Arya Mahila Samaj* which promotes the women empowerment along with the teaching of moral and spiritual principles of living (Kosombi 48). In Misra’s *Swarnalata* it is also clearly mentioned that the Christian missionaries are the first who have paid attention to women’s education in Assam (9). This new development is regarded mistakenly as the Christian aggression in parts of Assam. It can be said that the Christians know the Hindu’s orthodox and superstitious principles for the widows and the other low classwomen. Udayan Misra, the translator of the novel *Swarnalata* writes in the Introduction of the same novel on the liberal faith of Christianity:

The independent-minded Tora represents the comparatively liberated girl who because of her Christian faith is free to chart her own course in life, untrammelled by customs and traditions which tend to suffocate her many Hindu friends. (Intro. V)

The abandoned women and the other victimised women in a patriarchal society always try to find alternate ways to express their identity and emotions. Tora, another character in the novel *Swarnalata* is the girl born in a Hindu family does not accept the Hindu belief and principles. The orthodox Hindu society is seen to have rejected any possibility of inter – religious marriage, though Christian education is not so vehemently opposed or discarded.

Virginia Woolf in her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929) analyses that a woman must have money and a room or a specific space if she wants to write fiction (6). The term 'room' here itself not only signifies a physical space but also some independent thoughts which cannot be manipulated or changed by others. In this context, Misra portrays Tora as an independent girl, who can believe and depend on herself. She dislikes the way in which the Hindu society has been proceeding. She is free from the old conventional patriarchal principles and her thinking is highlighted when she says:

Those girls who stay indoors with their heads covered, they are seen as good ones. Girls like us are termed shameless. These days some even speak of women's independence. But these are the very people who refuse to let their girls out of the house. (194)

Tora satirises the so called learned, intelligent people like Panchanan Sarma who is the supporter of patriarchal ideologies. What Panchanan Sarma does is that he arranges his daughter Lakhi's child marriage in spite of his knowledge that child marriage is one kind of evils of a society. Though Sarma is well educated and knowledgeable, he could not escape from the traditional practice of child marriage. Tilottoma Misra satirizes the so called learned people that, though they give lectures or speak out for the woman empowerment, they do not

allow their daughters freedom from the oppressive norms of their tradition. Swarnalata also comments on the orthodox people that:

Our people think that way that because they have not learned the true meaning of women's liberty. What actually is modesty? It isn't surely covering one's head with an *uroni*<sup>13</sup> and hiding your face from people. The meaning of modesty rests on one's fear to commit sinful acts. That person is really modest who keeps away from shameful acts and resolutely goes ahead with his or her own work. (194)

The above mentioned lines signify what liberty means for a woman and how to behave or treat a woman within the family in particular and within the society in general. From the feminist's perspective, the novel *Swarnalata* is truly centered on the freedom of woman. The novel speaks in favour of the female empowerment including the child marriage, girl child education and widow remarriage. People blindly believe in some old ideas and principles without having the least concern for whether or not such principles and norms are harmful. Swarnalata, the daughter of Gunabhiram Barua and an open minded girl questions the orthodox people that "those padre women who are doing so much good work don't cover their heads and they work freely with a man" (194) and do they not belong to the category of 'modesty'.

Marie A Dakessian writes in the article, "Envisioning the Indian Sati: Mariana Starke's 'The Widow of Malabar' and Antoine Le Mierre's 'La Veuve Du Malabar'" about how Spivak compares patriarchy and imperialism. Gayatri Spivak very boldly says that imperialism and patriarchy are the same in terms of hierarchal structure (128). In imperialism, the ruling class controls the native people including the marginalized and 'weak' class while in a Patriarchal society what has been observed is that the women or the so called

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<sup>13</sup>A long veil worn by Hindu married women as a mark of respect for the elders

the submissive, calm, and inactive sex are dominated by the males. Adaptation from Antoine Le Mierre's *'La Veuve Du Malabar* Mariana Starke's *The Widow of Malabar* exhibits the controversial Hindu principles on the widow. Mariana Starke shows how "the Hindu widow steps out of her stereotypical role to become an astute and dynamic subject" (111).

Both the novel, *The Blue Necked God* and *Swarnalata* portray the very pathetic side of the women especially the widows, and how the widows are abandoned in many male dominated societies. The reviewer of the book *Widow in India: Social Neglect and Public Action* Arunima Banerji says that widows are constrained by some socio-cultural codes which are based on and defined by religion, kin, *jati*<sup>14</sup>, and customs (40). Male dominated and orthodox Brahmin society thinks that the wife is solely responsible for the husband's death without knowing his disease or other severe reasons. The death of a woman's husband in an orthodox society also symbolizes the death of the wife's social identity for the death of her husband she is discriminated, oppressed and exploited. These novels especially *The Hour Before Dawn* and *Swarnalata* which deal with the females' marginalisation in the hands of the patriarchal structure of society, bring some awareness and transformation, particularly in Assamese society.

*The Blue Necked God* explores the conditions of the *radheshyamis* who are discriminated against by their family in particular and by the society in general. This novel is autobiographical because as a wife the writer Indira Goswami also suffers such discriminations from the society. Her husband was dead after two years of her marriage which resulted in her pathetic and forlorn life. Goswami was born into a Brahmin family and after she became a widow she had to obey the rules and principles of the *satras*<sup>15</sup>. She

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<sup>14</sup> *Jati* indicates occupational status

<sup>15</sup> Brahmin religious institutions



describes her experience as a Brahmin widow in most of her novels and other literary creations. Though a widow she does not want to live within the 'four walls' which have been constructed by the social institutions like *satras* and *namghar*<sup>16</sup>. Marxist theorist and sociologist Louis Althusser may be useful to decode these institutions. Althusser says that the state or a specific area is controlled and dominated by certain institutions and he cited examples of the church, law, media, and trade union. In the context of the Indira Goswami's novel, the *satras* and the *namghars* symbolize what Althusser calls the ideological state apparatus that controls the orders of a society and transmits the orders and principles from one generation to another. Further, in her novel, *Datal Hatir Une Khuwa Haoda* (translated as *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* (2004) by the author herself) explores the gender discrimination and especially the exploitations of widows which are very prevalent after the post Independence Assam. In the introductions to this novel, she says that the inspiration to write this novel comes from the Amaranga *Satra* from South Kamrup. She spends her childhood days in that *satra* and the 'characters' in the novel *Datal Hatir Une Khuwa Haoda* she meets in the Amranga *satra*. Thus, this novel is a good depiction of her real experiences which has been visualized by her. Goswami knows the compulsions and restrictions of the *satras* on the women, especially the Brahmin widows. Goswami, as a widow, suffers and becomes a victim in the hands of patriarchal society.

Along with her other female centric novel, *Datal Hatir Une Khuwa Hawda* gives a real socio-cultural picture of post Independence Assam where women basically the Brahmin widows are targeted in the *satriya*<sup>17</sup> culture. Giribala, the protagonist in the novel *Datal Hatir Une Khuwa Haoda* is not allowed to eat meat. For the Brahmin society, a *Damodorian Gossain* should not eat meat. Many *satras* and other religious and societal institutions like

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<sup>16</sup>Religious institutions established in the villages by Vaishnavite saint Srimanta Sarkardeva

<sup>17</sup>The values and principles which are centered on Satras

*namghar* are the representations of patriarchy and its principles. In these Hindu institutions the women are victimized and targeted, for instance they are not allowed to enter and touch the idol in many Hindu temples and it is surprising that in the twentieth century, these customs are prevalent in many parts of India including Assam.

Like in the novel *Datal Hatir Une Khuwa Howda*, Goswami's *The Blue Necked God* is an attempt to depict the atrocities, cruelties, and oppressions of the females. The main setting of the novel *The Blue Necked Godis* in Brindavan at Uttar Pradesh, a place where she is doing her research on the *Ramayana* under the guidance of her teacher Upendra Chandra Lekharu. While doing her research she experiences unspeakable miseries suffered by Hindu widows in the land of Lord Krishna. The novel demonstrates a vivid picture of the nature of patriarchal structure even in sacred places like Brindavan. Many widows come to Brindavan because they were unwanted by from their family itself and the society in general. Goswami has seen that "the poverty of widows who were abandoned to die there (Brindavan) because their families did not want to have anything to do with them (xi)".

Goswami shows the patriarchal dominance with the examples of the *radheshyamis* in Brindavan in general and with Saudamini in particular. Saudamini is the protagonist, who after becoming a widow is brought to the holy place *Braja* which is also known as Brindavan. Goswami is very intent on depicting the patriarchal cruelties in her novels. Saudamini is forced to go to Brindavan because she establishes a love relationship with a Christian man after the death of her husband. The feminists raise the question, if a man can marry after the death of his wife why can't a woman marry a man? Simone De Beauvoir in her monumental work *The Second Sex* says that humanity is masculine and "man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (16). Whatever happens is a patriarchal society, every time it should be directed or controlled by the dominant males. Women are just regarded as some substitute things and used only for

getting pleasure and procreation. Actually, the widows want some dignity, love, and affections from the society. But the needs of women are generally ignored and considered unimportant. In the novel, *The Blue Necked God* Goswami shows how far a patriarchal society goes to restrain widows from certain privileges. The narrator describes on Saudamini that:

She was not wearing sindur, the mark of a married woman, in the parting of her hair. There was no *mangal sutra*<sup>18</sup> around her neck, nor was she wearing any toe rings, other things to show that she was married. She was not wearing the stark white sari of a widow either since young girls did not wear those nowadays. (7)

In this context Indira Goswami is very much particular about the Hindu widows, as she never mentions the conditions of widows in other religions. Saudamini, after becoming a widow lives under the rules, regulations, and compulsions of a patriarchal value system. Society does not allow her to live freely. In Brindavan, she feels nothing but loneliness and could not find anyone to hear her needs. She almost shouts and says that “I cannot spend my entire life like this, doing charity work (70). Saudamini’s parents literally scrapped her freedoms by taking away from her Christian lover and engaged her in some voluntary work in Brindavan. Saudamini accuses her father and screams that “you are all hypocrites . you are like butchers” (70).

Many problems like social, cultural, and political deprivations come to view while discussing the life of widows in India. Goswami’s novels are the evidence of bold, violent and passionate voices of the women who have been ignored, and marginalized. In the novel, *The Blue Necked God* Goswami reveals the sorrows of the *radheshyamis* and she also asserts

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<sup>18</sup>In Hindu customs the *mangal sutra* is a kind of necklace, worn by the married women as a mark of their marriage.

her own life experiences as a widow. Her depiction of Brindavan is first known in her autobiography *An Unfinished Autobiography* where she portrays a “hefty paanda, chasing her vehicle, screaming and asking for more money” and she said that she had not seen such naked greed and avarice ever in her life (xii)”. This is the picture of Brindavan where the priest and other high and feudal class people are bent on extorting money. Chandrabihari, one character in the novel *The Blue Necked God* reveals that in Brindavan “licentious and desperate young men” usually inspect the young widows, who are willing to do anything for a piece of bread (8). They strip their clothes and “make sure that they are without any blemishes” (8). This is the real picture of holy place Brindavan where a woman is being subjugated and used for the benefits of the males. What Indira Goswami shows through the novel *The Blue Necked God* the degradation of the morals of the people. Brindavan is considered a sacred place but Goswami’s projection of Brindavan is very heart rending and pathetic. For the degradation of moral and aesthetic values of Brindavan, Goswami holds the people there solely responsible.

It is an ordinary human question which may be put - How does it affect if a widow is living with the family and keep in touch with the family members? All the norms and principles of any patriarchal society are only the traditional ideas which have been reproduced year after year without any change. The Hindu law until recently did not grant any property rights for the women including the widows (Ghosh 1151). There are various reasons for the rejection of widows from their own family. Sometimes the widows have been castigated due to their property and by abandoning them outside the boundary her property can be taken by the in-laws family (Ghosh 1150). Moreover, widows are the easy victim of the society, because their loneliness gives chance to the opportunists to exploit, to make some illicit and adultery relationship. After the death of her husband, a woman loses her social identity and status as compared to the mainstream women, and the society and even the family

considers her a burden and orders her to do some hard work. Unlike other communities in India, Bengali communities are more intent on marginalizing the widows by sending them to other holy places like Mathura, Brindavan, and isolate the widows as a social category far from home (Ghosh 1151). At the religious places, the widows also are not feeling free, the fear of loneliness always hunts them. It is very ridiculous that even in the so called 'modern' era still there are people who hate the widows and throws them out to some old religious place so that the widows will not become a burden on her family and the society as well.

There are women writers who are not only interested in the atrocities of the patriarchy, but also in the myth, politics, religion, and other discourses. Indira Goswami's *The Blue Necked God*, besides exploring the patriarchal structure of society also depicts the myth and politics in Brindavan. During the festive time, many *Sethjis* (economically and socially sound people) come in Brindavan to worship, and they generally give food and clothes. Goswami is very much critical depicting the upper class people in Brindavan, because the *sethjis* does not distribute foods and clothes out of sympathy and love for the poor people but they believe that by distributing food and clothes to the poor and needy, God will mercyfully cleanse their sins (12). Goswami exposes both the physical and the moral degradation of Brindavan. On the other hand, Saudamini's mother is a blind believer who believes that the young widow's fate can be improved by visiting the ashram of Deodhari Baba. Like Anupama, there are a lot of superstitious believers who surrender themselves before the ashramas and other religious gurus. It is pertinent to question that does it justify or affect to bring a young widow like Saudamini to some religious gurus for the betterment of the widow's future? Goswami being a feminist critically examines the attitude of the patriarchal society towards the widows because the orthodox society does not pay heed to the widows' physical and emotional needs. Goswami vehemently exposes the darker side of the priests in the temples of Brindavan. Sashi a *radheshyami* is serving the temple's Lord

Damodar. The most pathetic condition of them as stated by Sashi that they have not been married but will have to live as husband and wife (62). The dominant class controls and supervises all the religious and moral activities which unfortunately victimise the widow in the Hindu society. Actually, the Hindu religion sanctions some rigid conventional social orders and values, and the women especially the widows should not cross that *Lakshman rekha*<sup>19</sup>. Even the modern legal system is unable to resist the existing societal taboos. In the novel, Saudamini is forced to go to Brindavan so that her parents Raychoudhuri and Anupama think, Saudamini's mind would become free and relax in Brindavan instead of spending time with the Christian lover(1). Orthodox Hindus did not allow marriage with christians, perhaps because they superstitiously feared this relationship would pollute the self and the next birth. Goswami through the story of the novel depicts how Saudamini's parents' belief in Brindavan is unfounded. The sacred place of Brindavan is gradually becoming a place of atrocities, exploitations, injustices and corruptions (Goswami 146). There are various instances where the males basically the *paandas* exploit the *radheshyamis* physically, emotionally, psychologically and even economically also. The narrator in *The Blue Necked God* considered the *paandas* as "Yamadoot, the god of death" (13). The *paandas* in Brindavan are so cruel and hard hearted that after the death of the *radheshyamis* they search the dead body for valuables :

perhaps the old woman had hidden away gold or silver coins on her persons. Perhaps tied them around her waist, or on the upper arms (13).

The *paandas* also engage in fighting over the funeral of a dead *radheshyami* while anticipating rich gifts. While they fight, Saudamini sees that some of their blows fall on the dead body, and the scene is so terrible. Saudamini comments sarcastically and sorrowfully :

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<sup>19</sup>In the *Ramayana* Lakshman rekha means a line drawn by Lakshman for the protection of his Brother's wife *Sita* from the enemy.

Yes, the things that happen at Braj! And this is the holiest of the holy places! The centre of the universe! (34)

The process of marginalization of widows, leads to two types of outcomes. Firstly sometimes some widows rebel against the existing laws of the society. Secondly, there are some widows who accept all their miseries and sorrows to almighty and wait for the salvation. This is what differentiates between the two novels *The Blue Necked God* and *Swarnalata*. Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *The Blue Necked God* portrays Saudamini, the protagonist as a submissive, docile and passive who being a widow always tries to obey the norms and principles of the misogynistic society. Saudamini never opposes her parent's decision when she is taken away to Brindavan. Saudamini, in Brindavan, feels sorry for the *radheshyamis*, and then she can imagine the consequence of her life. In *Braj* she finds no one to give her company and to share her emotions and needs. Mamoni Raisom Goswami's experiences and the pathetic conditions of widows at Brindavan are so real that the stories that grip the readers. Saudamini's pained heart raises such grievous questions that :

Was there ever another girl who had to face such a situation? Has anyone like me ever come to this sacred land of Braj?. (106)

Saudamini is bored and feeling lonely with the traditional values and principles of Brindavan. The narrator says that "an ever – present feeling of loneliness tortured her" (95). Though Saudamini is not adjusted in the surroundings of Brindavan, she never challenges the patriarchal structure unlike what Tilottoma Misra depicts through the characters of Lakhi, Tora, and Swarnalata. It also signifies that a widow in a Brahmin family cannot identify and express her feelings as much as she wants to. Goswami sometimes feel lonely and struggles a lot to gratify her own self and desires.

Both Mamoni Roisom Goswami and Tilottoma Misra are academicians who never believe and adhere to the rules and principles of patriarchy which are illustrated in their various literary creations. Tilottoma Misra portrays her protagonists as strong and challenging characters. Lakhi becomes a widow after a very few years of her child marriage and she is treated “the unlucky, unfortunate and ill fated one” by the villagers (96). When the male members of the village accuse Lakhi, the narrator Misra raises a sympathetic character Bishnupriya who consoles Lakhi by saying that :

You are not to be blamed for all this, my girl. Life and death are nature’s law. No one can change them. It is wrong to think that a girl’s life comes to an end the moments she becomes a widow. Nowadays things are changing. You must find the means to live with honour. We are there to support you. So, you needn’t worry, my child. (97)

In *The Blue Necked God* when Saudamini is feeling lonely she could not find anyone to console or give courage to her. What has been lacking in Goswami’s *The Blue Necked God* when compared with Misra’s *Swarnalata* is that Goswami is that in *The Blue Necked God* she depicts the forlorn, pathetic and gloomy picture of *radheshyamis* are the sufferers in the chauvinistic society. she has not given any messages through the story to remove the traditional taboos which handicap women in the society. On the other hand, though Tilottoma Misra reveals the social evils of the traditional Assamese society like the prohibition of widows remarriage, girl education, she projects the female characters in such a way that everyone challenges the rigid norms of the society. Lakhi wants to study and to become an independent woman after the death of her husband. The most crucial problems appear in front of Lakhi that there are no girls’ schools and on the other hand Lakhi’s parents are the true believers of “Hindu practices” which do not permit their daughter read in a boys’ high school because they are “tied with the traditional bonds and beliefs of society” (132). But



Gunabhiram Barua, the liberal reformer of the Assamese society and the activist of the Brahmo Samaj awakens Panchanan Sarma and inspiringly shows him the future :

Will you abandon the right path out of fear of the public? Today people may condemn you. But tomorrow when the country will move forward, everyone will praise your courage. (134)

Lakhi thinks of admission into a boys' school for higher studies since there are no girls' schools. The novelist Misra puts Lakhi in a bold role, because in the period of post Independence India girls were not allowed to go to school, and if girls did go to school they became the victims of the male students (Dube 14). For Lakhi, entering a boys' schools is a very challenging task because the whole society is against the very idea of a girl attending a school. Lakhi's uncle Hari Sarma strongly opposes Lakhi's admission in a boys' school. He angrily says :

Aren't you (Lakhi) ashamed to study with all those boys? Where one has heard of such a thing? Panchanan *Kakaideo*<sup>20</sup> must have lost his mind. To send a widowed girl out into the streets is in itself a sin. But to allow such a girl to sit with the boys in the same class! You all may not have any sense of shame. You don't have the right to spoil all the boys, understand? (140)

This is the state of society in Assam in the post – Independent era and in some parts of India in general where a widow is not given the minimum level of societal status and identity. In Indian scenario widowhood is considered as a crime committed by the widows on earth (Kosambi 42). In patriarchal society where the voices of the woman, including the widows, have been suppressed. In Misra's *Swarnalata*, the young widow Lakhi is treated by the villagers and even by her uncle as 'other'. Feminism fights against the inequality between

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<sup>20</sup>In Assamese elder brother is called *Kakaideo*

men and woman and the dominance of man in the patriarchal society. The feminist argues that why the people of misogynistic societies cannot accept a widow and why they do not think that the widows are like their own sisters and mothers. The chauvinistic society always tries to dominate the weaker sex by dictating the male terms. Tilottoma Misra, in this novel *Swarnalata*, depicts that Lakhi as a bold character having courage to establish her identity. Here in *Swanalata* Lakhi does not care for any laws and principles of the society. She boldly replies to her uncle Hari Sarma :

If I can study in the presence of all those boys, why is it that they can't, Just because of me? It seems that that the boys are weaker in mind than the girls. And you have been astonishing me for being a widow. Was I a widow from birth? All of you get together to get me married. I never set foot in my husband's house. Yet am I not allowed to stay like an unmarried girl. Am I to blame for my widowhood? (141)

This is the kind of atrocities a widow has to undergo in a patriarchal society. Misra's analysis of the forlorn life of the widows is very significant. Though Goswami, in *The Blue Necked God* explores the conditions of *radheshyamis* in Brindavan, Misra's depiction of widows in the novel *Swarnalata* is more nuanced than Goswami's because Misra emphasizes the empowerment of women including the widows through the implementation of education among the girl child, which is the strongest tool to strengthen a widow in order to establish her own identity and status in the society. As an academician, Misra addresses actively the issues of widow remarriage, prohibition of child marriage and the girl's education.

Widows' remarriage is a kind of societal superstition among the orthodox people. After the death of the husband, a woman is turned into a widow which is just a trick to

separate the widows from the mainstream womanhood. In the novel, *Swarnalata* Lakhi argues with her father ,

*Pitai*<sup>21</sup> do I really have to spend the rest of my life like this. What wrong have I done? I have done whatever you asked me to. And now my aunts always keep on accusing me that I am the unlucky one and that I am fated to suffer all the life. *Pitai*, I implore you, please do something to save me from this tortuous existence. (100)

Patriarchal psyche and principles are so unjust towards women. Biases towards women are most visible in terms of widow remarriage because if a widower remarries a woman after the death of his first wife the orthodox 'male-centric' society accepts it, but when a woman wants to do the same after the death of her husband it becomes illegal and beyond the existing societal norms. The remarriage of widows has also economic interests. In the article, *Kargil War Widows: Question of Compensation and Remarriage* (2003) Leena Parmar speaks in support of widows whose husbands were killed during the Kargil war. Leena reveals the patriarchal structure of some communities like in Rajasthan is so strong that the widows, whose husbands died in the Kargil war, are forced to marry their brother-in-law so that the financial condition of the family remains unaffected (Parmar 2637). The old - day bans on the remarriage of widows are the privilege of the upper class (Omvedt 188). The role of the classhierarchy in Assamese society is also very significant. Basically, the people of Assam believe in the Brahminical rules and principles for which the Brahmins get a chance to dictate the innocent people to follow their old traditional values.

Both the novels of Indira Goswami's *The Blue Necked God* and Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata* reveal the evils of society like the prohibition of widows remarriage in the conservative societies. Goswami's novel *The Blue Necked God* shows and examines why the

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<sup>21</sup>In Assamese, Father is called as Pitai, Pita, Deuta etc.

young widows come to the religious places like Mathura, Brindavan, and Banaras. She questions why the young widows are driven out of home and the society to spend the rest of their life in some sacred places. Indrani Sen's article "Resisting Patriarchy: Complexities and Conflicts in the Memoir of Haimabati Sen" shows that Banaras is considered as the "city of widows" (57). In some typical conservative families the widows have been treated badly and they are humiliated even with a handful of rice to depend on. (Sen 57)

The widow's sexuality is always under suspicion and scrutinized not only by men but also by some women from high class. Mamoni Raisom Goswami witnesses and experiences the Brahminical norms and principles for the women including the Brahmin widows which are reflected pre-dominantly in *The Blue Necked God* and *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tasker*. Misra's *Swarnalata* is the narrative to show how enlightened minds behave amongst the ignorant and innocent Assamese people. The novelist brings the functions of the Brahmo Samaj which exhibits and teaches the people to carry a liberal mindset and encourage people to give up conventional principles. In the novel *Swarnalata*, Gunabhiram Barua, a supporter of Brahmo Samaj marries the widow Bishnupriya and tries to remove the taboo about widow remarriage. In the nineteenth century many Hindu women particularly widows got converted to Brahmo Samaj because of the Brahmo's liberal attitude towards the 'marginalised woman' (Sen 58). The Brahmo Samaj advocates to impart education to the girls and the widows, even the Samaj establishes some shelter house for the 'neglected widows' and gives some training on handcrafts and other vocational skills so that they could stand without the dependence on anyone.

Feminist writings as well as activism in India appear to be ideologically and politically significant. In this context one may recall Charlott Bunch, an American feminist and writer, who remarks that the motto of the feminist movement should not only be to add some rights and freedom to women, rather the motive of this movement should be to

transform a society which is expressed as “transformational politics” (Tandon 32). It is clearly established that the novels *The Blue Necked God* and *Swarnalata* both speak on the women’s rights, identity and empowerment. But the efforts of the writers would go in vain if the society and readers never change their patriarchal mindset. In *Swarnalata*, Misra explores several women’s issues like the rights of the education of girl child, widow remarriage, marriage with other caste and other religious groups which are considered as dominant social evils in many parts of Assam in particular. Like Misra, Indira Goswami also portrays in *The Blue Necked God* the hegemonic nature of the males in religious places like Brindavan in Uttar Pradesh. Though the setting of the novel is in Brindavan, the whole story of the novel revolves around the forlorn and pathetic lives of the *radheshyamis* in general, and Saudamini in particular. Goswami indirectly ridicules and satirises the Brahminical rules. As a Brahmin widow she has faced many challenges to overcome. It is possible she could have written a novel centred on Brahminical norms. But her own experience is not singular, and which echoes others’ similar sufferings. Her passionate zeal for social reformations involving women move her to undertake an anti-Brahminical stance in major aspects of her novels.

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**CHAPTER IV:  
CONCLUSION**



## Chapter V

### Conclusion

The dissertation entitled “Images of Women in Assamese Fictions: A Study of Selected Fictions of Goswami, Saikia and Misra” traces the conditions and plights of women in Assamese society and in India in general. All the three primary texts, Mamoni Raisom Goswami’s *The Blue Necked God*, Bhabendra Nath Saikia’s *The Hour Before Dawn* and Tilottoma Misra’s *Swarnalata* show different forms of exploitation and mistreatment of women, which includes child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage, the pathetic life of widows in religious places like Brindavan, the lack of education and ignorance of women etc.

The present study is critically focussed on the images of women as portrayed by the selected novelists in the post – Independence Assam. These images range from the simple and ignorably least evolved women to the highly individuated and developed characters. The dissertation has particular interests in women vis-à-vis their patriarchal societies. It has been found that women as the selected novels describe are unjustly marginalised and victimised under oppressive systems controlled by dominant male chauvinists. These social systems are mainly patriarchal in nature, value and the discrimination are found to have spread across social borders and religious divisions throughout the world. Admittedly patriarchy is a powerful institution which controls and orients human activities and relationships. In this context, the Assamese society in the post – Independence era comes to our view repeatedly in the selected novels. It is realised that major women protagonists appear with their dissenting voices and sometimes with radical positions to counter the exploitive patriarchal orders. All three novelists have created women characters who ordinarily spell out powerful and challenging messages to the society.

Of the three novelists of Assam two are women and one is male, but each is found to be a social critic and reformist. In order to know the nature of patriarchy both in India and major Western cultures of the world, the thesis adopts cross – cultural references as well as similarities. In particular, Western feminists and women thinkers are found influential to have inspired the writers of Assam whose feminist critiques are not necessarily different though the fact remains that the Assamese society is traditionally Indian. In some cases, the British colonial rule appears to intervene in the orthodox Assamese society directly with its advanced Christian reformation and by questioning the retrogressive social orders of Assam especially affecting women.

The First Chapter of the dissertation “Introduction” highlights the emergence of Assamese literature and the rise of feminist interest in Assamese writers and their writings. During the colonial period in Assam, the Englishmen enlightened the innocent people with the new values and codes which are more unorthodox and liberal in nature. It was the Baptist Missionary Press, established in 1846 in the Sivasagar District in Assam, which circulated the first Assamese newspaper under the editorship of Nathan Brown. Though *Arunodoi* was published under the guidance of the Englishmen, there were many Assamese like Gunabhiram Borua, Hemchandra Borua and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan who contributed to the magazine with their liberal ideas which are different from the traditional and typical thoughts of the Assamese societies (Bora 186). This chapter introduces the authors of the selected texts and their literary works. Bhabendra Nath Saikia, Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Tilottoma Misra are well known literary figures particularly in Assamese society. Along with other writers in Assam, Saikia, Goswami and Misra have been able to create awareness in Assamese society. Bhabendra Nath Saikia’s *The Hour Before Dawn* portrays a typical post Independence Assamese society where woman like Menoka with her bold actions subvert and challenge the patriarchal Assamese society. On the other hand, Mamoni Raisom Goswami’s

*The Blue Necked God* and Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata* deal with the depiction of the forlorn conditions of widows.

The Second Chapter "Critiquing the Patriarchal Society" analyses how the three primary texts *The Hour Before Dawn*, *The Blue Necked God* and *Swarnalata* resisted patriarchy. Along with the selected texts the chapter includes some feminists' texts irrespective of any genres and Assamese texts in translation, which are put in a comparative framework, and the characters are compared for locating the social and customary attitude towards women. The chapter examines Indira Goswami's novel *The Blue Necked God*, which explores the utterly deplorable conditions of the widows in Brindavan. This text critically ridicules the religious institutions and shrines like Mathura and Brindavan. The hierarchical system in terms of gender is still seen in some parts of Assam like the Brahmin *satras* where women are not allowed to enter the main premises. *The Hour Before Dawn* is a representation of the bold and violent nature of a woman who subverts the patriarchal social roles. It is Menoka, the protagonist who challenges the chauvinist society and takes revenge on her husband by engaging in an illicit affair with Modon, a lower class man. The novel *Swarnalata* brings to the forefront the prime issues that women are facing in a male centric society, like widows remarriages, child marriage, and the prohibition of girl child education. By showing all the evil sides of patriarchy all three selected texts promote a healthy society where everyone gets equal opportunity irrespective of their gender. In this chapter many Assamese as well as non Assamese literary texts are chosen to discuss the woman's issues.

This chapter also discusses how writers have questioned the nature of the patriarchy in different societies such as African, European, Indian and a number of esteemed feminist writers and thinkers to consider their critique of the societies to which they belong. It is found that throughout the world, patriarchal structure in the West and in the East show characteristic attitudes and ideologies that oppress and marginalize women. In 1792 Mary

Wollstonecraft published her monumental work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, where she explains the inequalities in America between her mother and father, and observed the problems faced by other women of the society. On the other hand, Virginia Woolf wrote *A Room of One's Own* (1929) which questioned that why women rarely appeared in the history. She points to many depictions of women in the poems and plays, but in real life they are rarely seen. The name of this book is itself very symbolic because through the text Woolf argues that a girl must have a room of her own if she desires to write something.

The Third Chapter “Woman’s Activism in Bhabendra Nath Saikia’s *The Hour Before Dawn*” shows the power and strength of the woman. The motifs of the feminist writers are to examine whether the females get equal opportunity the way a man enjoys in the society or any other places and to interrogate the reasons for exploitations, oppression and suppression of females by their counterpart. Bhabendra Nath Saikia projects the patriarchal society where Mohikanta represents one of the chauvinists who, after eleven years of marriage with his first wife Menoka, remarries his second wife Kiron. After marrying Kiron, Mohikanta ignores Menoka completely. By depicting the character Menoka, Saikia wants to show what happens if a woman moves against the society. Menoka is bold and violent in nature. Menoka challenges her husband in particular, and the society in general by establishing the love relationship with a lower class guy, Modon. This chapter analyses whether Menoka’s action against Mohikanta is justifiable or not, and what happens if Menoka did the same things, or more specifically if Menoka ignores, neglects and marry another man in front of her first husband Mohikanta, what would the society do? According to some critics Menoka’s action to subvert the rigid norms of the misogynistic society and to teach a lesson to Mohikanta is justifiable because if a man with his power and status can marry another woman despite living together with his first wife, why cannot a woman does the same? To some extent, the novel *The Hour Before Dawn* loses the interest of the feminist perspective, because feminism

believes equality, but what happens when Menoka uses Modon as a weapon to fight against Mohikanta? Even the novelist Bhabendra Nath Saikia is critical in this aspect since he never highlights the emotional state of Modon who is involved in the extramarital relationships with Menoka. In *The Hour Before Dawn*, Saikia's depiction of the character Menoka is bold and violent. Through Menoka's action, the writer subverts the typical traditional society. In the midst of the twentieth century Assamese society there were probably few women who were coming forward to fight against the deprivation of rights and cruelties and dominations. Saikia also gives a glimpse of future generation through characters like Indro, Menoka's elder son. The character Indro visualizes Saikia's imagination and perspective towards the future society and generation where women would not be facing discriminations in a society. Indro, though a product of the patriarchal society, supports his mother and her treatment to Mohikanta.

The Fourth Chapter "The Forlorn Life of Widows in Goswami and Misra" examines the issues of women, especially the segregations on widows in Hindu societies, girl child education and child marriage. This chapter analyses Indira Goswami's *The Blue Necked God* and Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata*. The impact of patriarchal and Brahmin society and its values and orders have led to Mamoni Raisom Goswami writing such novels where are socially provocative and reflect lively stories of Assam and India in general. Indira Goswami being a Brahmin wants to avoid the restrictions and dogmas of the Brahmins as she already mentions that she has written the novels and other literary works from the direct experience of her life (Lal 72). She witnesses the plights of widows in Brindavan when she is doing her research on the *Ramayana* in Uttar Pradesh. The *radheshyamis* in *The Blue Necked God* can be compared to the Brahmin widows in *satras*. As a young widow, she has to abide by the rules and regulations of the *satra* which Goswami creatively presents in her novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* (2004). It is also noteworthy that *The Blue Necked God* is a

representation of her outburst, and anger for the rigid traditional Brahmin rules, which Goswami has been undergoing. The question arises; does the Brahmin and other high class people have valid reasons or logic for their norms and principles? Goswami's other novel *The Man from Chinnamasta* (2006) is an attempt to revolt against the patriarchal society. For example, Bidhibala, an eleven year old girl, in *The Man From Chinnamasta* is to be married to a forty year old man who is her father's age, who also has a wife and two daughters. Along with the male dominated issue, Goswami examines the logic behind animal sacrifice in the name of God in the novel *The Man From Chinnamasta*. Bidhibala on the day of her marriage secretly escapes and joins a prostitute group. What makes Bidhibala to become a whore is the pressure of her orthodox and superstitious society which she wants to escape from and live herself as a prostitute rather than living in the male dominated prejudices where freedom, love and emotions are rarely to be found. Along with the issues of feminism, Mamoni Raisom Goswami tries to introduce the impact of superstitions among the folks. After analyzing the texts of Goswami's *The Blue Necked God* and Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata*, it can be said that women are exploited, suppressed, and repressed mercilessly. If a man can remarry a woman even when his first wife is alive, one wonders why a woman cannot marry a man after the death of her first husband.

Tilottoma Misra's novel *Swarnalata* invokes the reader to rise against the injustices on women in the form of child marriage and the exploitation and deprivations of widows. Misra depicts the emergence of the Brahmo Samaj and examines how the Brahmo Samaj enlightens particularly the Assamese society. On the other hand, the novel *Swarnalata* primarily deals with the issues like widows' remarriage and women's education. Lakhi, the child widow struggles for her identity and to educate herself in a patriarchal Assamese society. Udayan Misra, the translator of the novel *Swarnalata* comments that "*Swarnalata* is a moving portrait of social flux and transformation that marked the closing decades of the

nineteenth century Assam” (Intro III). These two novels, *The Blue Necked God* and *Swarnalata* with the outstanding depictions of life like characters reject all the rigid societal norms and principles.

Saudamini, the protagonist of *The Blue Necked God* feels lonely in Brindavan and is engaged in some voluntary work. When Saudamini needs some attention, love and kindness, the society and even her parents segregate her and take her away to Brindavan because it comes to her parents notice that she is developing a relationship with a Christian man after her husband’s death (1). To them it is immoral and socially unthinkable for a woman to marry a man after the death of her husband, and more so to establish a relationship with a Christian guy. The patriarchal society never imposes the same rules and principle on men, though they commit the same mistake as women. The societal bondages especially regarding the women are nothing but conventional stereotypes and notions which the people are used to follow. For instance, Saudamini’s father, being an educated physician, is one who believes the values and orders which the society dictates. Like him the so called intelligent people follow and maintain the societal rigid parameters. Thus, Saudamini’s parents never think what she feels when she is taken away to Brindavan for some voluntary work. Actually, this kind of atrocities and injustices to women is totally illogical, and should be prohibited from the society.

In *The Blue Necked God*, Goswami painfully describes, “how long such horrible deeds will continue to be committed in the name of religion” (152). Religion is a kind of belief and a way to worship the ‘unknown one’ that is believed to control the human beings. But it is observed through Mamoni Raisom Goswami’s novel *The Blue Necked God* that, in the name of religion, many helpless women in India have been exploited, and the narrator very sadly questions that “how long will such horrible deeds continue to be committed in the name of religion” (152). This novel, in a way exposes the degradation of human moral value

especially in Brindavan. Brindavan is considered as a sacred place where Lord Krishna grew up. But, the holiness is decreasing due to some evil minded people, including the temple priests..However, in her autobiography *An Unfinished Autobiography*, she exposes the nature of *paandas* (family priests)who are chasing her (Mamoni Raisom Goswami)vehicle and asking for money. The patriarchs and the society need to realise the age-old sanctity of the religious places and above all respect the human values. Widows, who are castigated from the society and even from the family, generally go to the religious places to spend and sacrifice the rest of their lives. Widows come to Brindavan with the motive of worshipping Lord Krishna to get salvation. But ironically in *Braja*, the widows encounter the greedy priests and the other lustful people like landlords, *Jomindar* and Brahmins etc. Goswami mentions in her autobiography that a Brahmin priest collects money from the old widows on the pretext of giving them the last rites. But after collecting the money he left to somewhere (Goswami 163). In some cases when a temple is given to a wealthy custodian, along with the temple the *radheshyamis* attached to that particular temple come under his control, they even sometimes sleep with the new owner for his pleasure. This is an injustice against women, which the society at large ignores to take note of. Secondly, women in those religious institutions do not find avenues to speak against the hypocritical attitudes of power brokers. Mamoni Raisom Goswami herself has witnessed and experienced the exploitations of the widows when she was doing her research.

The last chapter entitled “Conclusion” is an attempt to make the concluding remarks on the status of women in Assamese society, and Indian society in general. After analyzing the three selected texts it has been observed that the women are considered as ‘other’ in the patriarchal societies. Male exploitations of women are seen in the three selected texts where male characters dominate the society and can do anything according to their will.



Some writers like Neeru Tandon argues that the depiction of a woman's condition might have been different from a male and a female writer's perspectives (24). She further says that in the male authored texts women are projected solely as the play things of men. But the novel *The Hour Before Dawn* written by Bhabendra Nath Saikia is no way handicapped in exploring the emotions, love and attachments of the females. By reading the novel one could understand that Saikia gives equal or even more interest to Menoka, the female protagonist of *The Hour Before Dawn* as the other feminist writers do to the female characters of their novel.

The three selected texts of this dissertation are written by both male and female authors. From that perspective Mamoni Raison Goswami and Tilottoma Misra's viewpoints are a little different from that of Bhabendra Nath Saikia's attitude when it comes to portraying feminist issues. Being academicians, both Goswami and Misra try to tend awareness against the tradition bound norms and principles through lifelike characters in their novels. In *The Blue Necked God* and *Swarnalata* the female characters react quietly against the society's injustices. The *Radheshyamis* in *The Blue Necked God* never speak against the landlords and the priests as they promise to surrender themselves before them. For example, when the temple where Sashi a *radheshyami* served is sold, one middle class man proposes her to work in his temple. He said that if necessary, she (Sashi) has to sleep with him (89). It can be said that women are used like commodities, whenever they are desired. On the other hand, in *Swarnalata*, Misra projects the pathetic treatment of women. For instance, Panchanan Sarma arranges child marriage for his daughter Lakhi and she accepts it because pointing fingers or making arguments against one's parent's decision at that time is considered a sign of bad manners and of rebellious characters. Silence is for Misra and Goswami a way to revolt against the inequalities, and the cruelties of the males. It is not only the patriarchal society to be blamed for the exploitations of women, but it is the responsibility

also of the particular character or more specifically the ‘victims’ who refuse to raise voice against the misogynistic society. Most feminists believe that except for the biological differences, the terms and identities regarding the sexes are constructed by the society. The society and the peripheral values and traditions shape one's identity and impact on the behaviours of an individual. Thus, it may have been assumed that Saikia's protagonist Menoka's actions towards her husband Mohikanta are a result of societal patriarchal domination. Menoka pays back Mohikanta, and in a way the existing rigid norms and principles of that particular society make her take such a bold and violent step towards Mohikanta. From the feminist perspectives, it is the male Beauvoir mentions that the woman is the creation of the situation and the attitude of a particular society (68). It is the male centric society that ushers Menoka to have an extramarital love relation with Modon secretly. Likewise, Lakhi's challenge to the society by studying in a boys' school as depicted in the novel *Swarnalata* is appreciable from the feminist viewpoint. After becoming a widow at a young age, she has been nursing the dream to study. But the disciplines and restrictions on women, especially the widows in the patriarchal society emerge as an obstacle to her dreams. The feminists and humanists have always questioned such restrictions imposed only on women. The selected novelists have probed these issues from multiple perspectives. Lakhi's admission to a boys' school, Gunabhiram Barua's wedding with a widow, Menoka's revenge upon her husband Mohikanta are some of the instances where the particular character challenges the existing societal norms.

The selected novelists are consciously motivated to challenging and examining the patriarchal stereotypes that victimize women in a discriminatory society. What the modern feminism wants is to free society from the existing beliefs and norms. It is a movement which “brings more balanced and saner equality between the sexes and achieve a respectable individual liberty for women with their natural instincts and characteristics intact” (Tandon

25). The novelists are deservingly feminists as their works focus on women's issues. The deterioration in the status of females basically in the Indian societies arouses a reasoned response from feminists and humanists and their urge to examine social ills. The selected novels of this dissertation illustrate that some women characters are reduced to nonentities and objects of patriarchal enjoyments. These also state how the patriarchal society stands as an obstacle to maintain a balance between male and female. If the people continue to maintain the orthodox rules and principles, society would not develop intellectually.

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**PARTICULARS OF THE CANDIDATE**

**NAME OF CANDIDATE** : **LAKHYAJIT NATH**  
**DEGREE** : **M.Phil.**  
**DEPARTMENT** : **English**  
**TITLE OF DISSERTATION** : **Images of Women in Assamese Fiction: A Study of Selected Fictions of Goswami, Saikia and Misra**  
**M.Phil. Regn. No and Date** : **MZU/M.PHIL./442 of 26.04.2018**  
**DATE OF ADMISSION** : **31.07.2017**  
**APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL**  
**1. DRC** : **16.04.2018**  
**2. BOS** : **19.04.2018**  
**3. SCHOOL BOARD** : **26.04.2018**  
**4. DUE DATE OF SUBMISSION** : **2 .06.2019**  
**5. EXTENSION IF ANY** : **Yes, One Semester (Till 31.07.2019)**

**HEAD**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**



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<b>Class</b>	<b>Board/ University</b>	<b>Year of Passing</b>	<b>Division/Grade</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
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XII	Assam Higher Secondary Education Council	2012	I	74.20
B. A	Dibrugarh University	2015	I	62.64
M.A	Tezpur University	2017	II	57.43
M.Phil.	Mizoram University	Course work completed in 2017	I	Correspondence to 63.3% in terms of percentage conversion

**Other relevant information:****Seminars:**

1. Nath, Lakhyajit. Paper Presented. 'Indianization of English in *Seven Steps Around the Fire.*' UGC Sponsored national seminar on Modern Indian Drama: Theory, Practice and Criticism. Organized by Digboi Mahila Mahavidyalaya, 10-11 September, 2016.
2. Nath, Lakhyajit. Paper Presented. 'An Outlanders Version of History: A Reading of Edward Gait's *A History of Assam.*' National seminar on Revisiting the Sources of the

History of Assam: Horizontal and Vertical Sources. Organized by Sibsagar College, Joysagar. 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> January 2017

3. Nath, Lakhyajit. Paper presented. 'Classroom Observation in Modern Language Classroom: An Analysis of Effective Classroom Management.' National seminar on Innovative Pedagogy and Effective Teaching Learning organised by department of Education, Tezpur University, 14-16 March 2016.
4. Nath, Lakhyajit. Paper Presented. 'Rethinking the Yoruba Folktales tradition in Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*' , National Seminar on Understanding Children's Literature of Nuchhungi Renthlei: Approaches and Systems, organized by Department of Mizo, Pachhunga University College, 17<sup>th</sup> April, 2018.
5. Nath, Lakhyajit. Paper Presented. 'Defining the Mishing Identity in Rajani Kanta Bordoloi's *Miri Jiyori* (1984): An Analysis', National seminar on Rethinking Tribal Identity organized by Department of English, Mizoram University, 28<sup>th</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> March, 2019.

#### **Conferences:**

1. Nath, Lakhyajit. Paper Presented. 'Teaching Short Stories To Enhance Language Teaching-Learning: Issues And Effectiveness.' 11<sup>th</sup> International and 47<sup>th</sup> National Elt@i Conference on Content Based Instruction and Learning: Redefining the English Language Curriculum, organized by Vasavi College of Engineering (Autonomous), 30<sup>th</sup> June to 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2016.

#### **Workshop:**

1. Nath, Lakhyajit. Attended UGC-DRS Workshop on Archival Research and Literary Studies, Organized by Department of English and Foreign Languages, Tezpur University, 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2016.

**Published Research Papers:**

1. Nath, Lakhyajit (2017), Published Research Paper titled *Identity Construction in Assamese Language* in an International e-journal 'Dimorian Review', Vol: 5, Issue:4. ISSN 2394-9163.
2. Nath, Lakhyajit (2017), Published Research Paper titled *Depiction of Anarchy and Sexuality in Shakespear's Measure for Measure* in an International e-journal 'Dimorian Review', Vol: 5, Issue:2, ISSN 2394-9163.
3. Nath, Lakhyajit (2017), Published Research Paper titled *Edward Gait's A History of Assam: A Study on the Antiquity of Assam* in an International UGC approved journal Literary Herald, ISSN 2454-3365.
4. Nath, Lakhyajit (2017), Published Research Paper titled *Postcolonial Resistance in Regional Language: With Special Reference to Assamese Language* in a UGC approved Journal (No64788) 'Journal of Literature and Cultural Studies' Vol: 4, Issue: 5, ISSN 2348-1188.
5. Nath Lakhyajit (2018), "Understanding Children's Literature of Nuchhungi Renthlei: Approachs and Systems" Understanding Children's Literature of Nuchhungi Renthlei. Ed. Laldinmawia and et.al. pp 238-252 (ISBN 978-81-938727-0-3)

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