

# **Women in Indian Literature and Society : Different Scopes of Study**

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**Department of Hindi  
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## The 'New Woman' in Colonial India : A Study of Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata*

Bhatima Barman

"The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we *should* be rather than recognizing how we are. Imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn't have the weight of gender expectations" (Adichie 34)

In December 2012, celebrated writer and feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie spoke these lines while delivering a talk at TEDx Euston. Although it is at present the twenty-first century, this quest for 'identity' and protest against gender stereotyping is not a recent one. For many centuries now, women have had to fight their way through various obstacles posed by 'civilisation' to assert their rights. In most patriarchal societies, owing to biological differences and cultural denominations, women are forced to occupy marginalized positions, both in the family as well as in society in general. It is patriarchy which decides 'what' or 'how' a woman should be:

One may be born as a 'female' of the human race but it is civilization which creates 'woman', which defines what is 'feminine', and proscribes how women should and do behave. And what is important is that this social construction of 'woman' has meant a continued oppression of women. The social roles and modes of behaviour that civilisations have assigned to women have kept them in an inferior position to that of men. (Freedman 14)

Yet, across centuries, and across the globe, women have fought and are still fighting. But in most cases, these struggles remain undocumented, because of which the "struggles of one generation are for gotten by the succeeding generations who begin again, unaware of, or taking for granted what had been done by their foremothers. Women's history is thus an endless cycle of struggles and retreats" (Mahanta 1).

This paper is an attempt to explore the lives of three women straddling between tradition and modernity. Set in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata* is a historical and biographical fiction documenting the waves of change and resistance that resonated in colonial Assam during that time. The issues of Sati, widow remarriage, women's education etc. were being stoically dealt with by the British authorities supported by Indian reformers like Vidyasagar, Raja Rammohan Roy etc. As many people began to be influenced by Western thought and philosophy, they realized the monstrosity of the customs of *sati* or the stigma of widowhood, but the fight for their eradication was long drawn-out. "The socio-cultural interactions between the west and the east through colonial education, print culture, legal institutions, legal systems etc., led to a new awakening in Bengal, known as the 'Bengal Renaissance' whose impacts were felt gradually all over the country" (Chaudhury 140), and Gunabhiram Barua was one such Assamese personality who was one of the first advocates for widow remarriage and female education.

Widowhood was a social menace and a traumatic experience for women, and widow remarriage was one of the most contentious issue in India. In colonial Assam too, widowhood was a social stigma which mostly existed among the high caste Brahmins and other upper caste people. Burdened under



austere rituals and considered to be the harbinger of bad luck, widows were practically ostracized from society. Gunabhiram Barua was a supporter of widow remarriage and expressed his views in 'Orunodoi' and subsequently wrote a play *Ram Navami* which explored the contentious relationship between a man and a widow. Gunabhiram Barua (a Brahmo Samaj convert) set an example by marrying a Brahmin widow Bishnupriya Devi, which however, led to serious repercussions as the highly conservative Assamese society could not accept such an act. Owing to his position and personality, people could not openly boycott him but the ostracism was palpable, especially to Bishnupriya.

Intertwined with the issue of widowhood was the issue of women's education. Both these issues received strong resistance from a conservative Hindu society, and in fact, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar at one point had to accept the failure of the reformers to bring about changes for ushering in a new and emboldened woman. And here, the role of the Baptist missionaries must be mentioned, as the "colonial intervention made a great breakthrough in the meaning and context of widowhood as for the first time modern education and criticisms from the various Christian missionaries made it a serious issue to be dealt with" (Chaudhury 137). Tilottoma Misra weaves the lives of the three young women Swarnalata (daughter of Gunabhiram Barua and Bishnupriya), Tora and Lakhipriya around these issues which were gradually going to change the future and fates of the three girls.

Although Gunabhiram Barua had taken a bold step by marrying Bishnupriya, the writer shows that it was the woman who had to bear the brunt of the implicit ostracism. Bishnupriya's silent concern for her daughter is obvious as although "she had in her own quietly determined manner borne the onslaughts of society, Bishnupriya hoped that she would be able to protect her children from all the unpleasant consequences of certain decisions taken by her husband which seemed to violate the accepted customs" (Misra 9-10). The ill treatment meted to Bishnupriya and Swarnalata on the day of Lakhi's marriage is an example of deep rooted adherence to regressive customs (there was no place for Bishnupriya, since she could not sit among the married Hindu women, nor had she any place among the Brahmin widows!). Even educated young men like Lakheswar could not shed off their narrow mindedness when he declares that Hakim Dangoria (Gunabhiram Barua) lost his caste for marrying a widow. He, however, receives a blow when Lakhi in utmost simplicity questioned: "If there is no harm in a man marrying a second time, what is wrong if a woman does it?" (Misra 89). The simple question came as a shock for Lakheswar, for, till then he believed that "his opinion was the accepted opinion of the entire Brahmin society" (Misra 89). Even elites of the more improved and liberal spirited Bengali society were not free from such prejudices against widowhood. Maharshi Devendranath Tagore rejected the proposal of Swarnalata for his son Rabindranath Tagore since she was the daughter of a widow who had remarried. However, it was Dharmakanta and the widowed Lakhi's bold step which ushers in some ray of hope. The majority of the peoples' resistance to social reforms is very well reflected in Bishnupriya's silent fear: "Behind this silent prayer lay the centuries-old fear of all the hardened social customs and practices which have shaken the purpose even of the great social reformers" (Misra 10).

And on the front of women's education too, conservative Assamese protested the idea of educating women: "Gunabhiram had cautioned the readers of *Orunodoi* that if Assam as a nation was to make progress it must discontinue the evil practice of denying education to girls" (Misra 11). Yet, twenty years later after the publication of that letter, women's education remained a myth. In Assam, as in other parts of India, women's education received support from the Christian missionaries. With the arrival of the American Baptist Missionaries in Upper Assam in 1836, started the uphill task of educating the Assamese women. Not undermining the efforts of missionaries in spreading knowledge and introducing education among women, the inherent intention of proselytizing and conversion must also



be mentioned here. The conscious and dedicated efforts of the missionaries were definitely not without their own agenda:

They knew that it is the native women who were maintaining the traditions and if, their mindsets can be changed the Hindu society as a whole would ultimately convert. In order to achieve it, they took several measures like spread of education and introduction of western medicine, and the printing press etc. The issue of widowhood was one of their prime targets, as it was (and still is) one of the most sentimental issue for the women as well as the society as a whole. But, so strong was the hold of the traditions in the country the missionaries had very limited success among the majority of the people in terms of their basic agendas. But, their activities helped in the growth of awareness among the Indian people about their problems as well as to find avenues to resolve them. (Chaudhury 138)

Women's education faced strong resistance from conservative men as well as women, for education was seen as an avenue which will lead to a deterioration in the character of a woman. A woman's place was in the 'hearth' and the 'home', and education would only jeopardise such settled and defined position of women. The idea of a woman's place in the 'home' was so engrained that women themselves felt that education was only an aberration; and hence, as per the records of a missionary wife in 1851, the main obstacle in women's education was "the women's own belief, impressed on them from birth, in their ignorance and inability to learn; and the ridicule they faced if they ever tried to do so" (Mahanta 8). In comparison to Swarnalata and Lakhi, Tora (Christian convert) seemed to be in a better position, as she could freely and confidently go to school and plan her future of becoming a teacher. It is Lakhi who had to fight against a conservative Brahmin society which was scandalized when her father decided to send his child-widow Lakhi to school again. The writer also throws light on the condition of education system of that period in Assam. Lakhi had to attend a boys' school as there was no school for girls in the higher sections in Nagaon. She was a Brahmin child-widow who was admonished for not keeping fasts for the salvation of her dead husband's soul. Her spirited reply to her uncle reflects the intense anger and frustration: "I have no wish of becoming a clerk or a mohuri. I just want to be a human being. My husband died of dysentery. He did not die because of my sins" (Misra 141). Interestingly, although Gunabhiram Barua advocates the need of women's education, yet he never talks about achieving self-reliance through work. He emphasizes more on the Victorian ideal of a 'companion', wherein an educated wife would be a more suitable companion for the husband. Swarnalata had the privilege of studying at Bethune school in Kolkata where she was exposed to various intellectuals and reformist leaders. However,

caught in the struggle between modern ideas and deep-rooted customs and traditions she had to eventually submit to her personal engagements. But the twenty-eight years of her life which is known and depicted in this novel is enough to realize the contribution she has made for the self-discovery of the Assamese women. Her observations and thoughts as captured by the author are a clear indication of the 'new woman' emerging within her. (Buragohain 3)

Unlike Tora and Lakhi, Swarnalata, remains at home and succumbs to the duties of a doting daughter and wife.

"The colonial woman has always been under the scanner for her apparent absence in the annals of history" (Silences and the Speaking Voices). Most of the women in the novel have a muted existence reflecting the marginalized position that they shared in the society. Bishnupriya's *silent* prayers and *quiet* fears succinctly describes the conflict and anguish within her but which hardly receives voice. Lakhi's mother was a representative figure of thousands of conservative women who were conditioned to blindly follow the dictates of a patriarchal society: "She really couldn't decide as to what was right



and what wrong... Whatever the greater section of society believed, she too accepted without dissent" (Misra 59). The waves of social reform had undoubtedly affected the lives of the three women. The import of new ideas enabled a widow like Lakhi to not only educate herself but also tread the path of self-reliance by becoming a teacher; as well as garnering courage enough to defy her society and marry Dharmakanta. Tora's association with the missionaries had emboldened her to chart her own path. Owing to her exposure to a more liberal world than in Assam, Swarnalata, too, takes control of her life and undertakes the responsibility of looking after her brothers after her father's death, instead of relying on others. Through *Swarnalata*, Tilottoma Misra gives voice and shape to the women of the colonial period who were fighting their own battles in their respective measures and trying to forge an identity in the midst of their struggles.

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