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Examining Depiction of Women in Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata*

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## Letter of Approval

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## Examining Depiction of Women in Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata*

### Abstract

*This paper examines the depiction of women in Tilottoma Misra's Swarnalata in the light of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the Subaltern Perspective. The novel picturizes the condition of women in nineteenth-century Assam through the three female characters: Swarna, Tora, and Lakhipriya. Through these female characters, Misra presents the prevalent conventional notions in the then society that had suppressed females, in the beginning, and as the story grows she eventually releases that through the agency they were able to debunk the orthodoxical instances. Therefore, this research paper focuses on three specific questions: how have women been depicted in the novel? Why does the writer choose to write Swarnalata amidst the turbulence? And why a character like Gunabhiram has been presented? With the focus on these three characters, the paper argues that Misra's politics is to address that women do not remain in a static position but rather their state of vulnerability changes when they are provided agency. Furthermore, it is through the agency that women can obtain a position equivalent to that of the males in society.*

Keywords: Swarnalata, Subaltern, Organic intellectuals, Agency, Liberation

Women are the primary characters who confront society's changing facets the most. The doubly effaced group of people, with no excuse in compromising the hardship, imbued within the social domain, constantly withstand the bitter obstruction. These unconditional deprivations are the limitless exercise of women who constantly fight for their sustenance, ultimately triumphing over subordination and resisting their pathetic condition. Therefore, Tilottoma Mishra's *Swarnalata* is the vivid articulation of women's consistent collision with the changing society and the austerity they embrace to transform social structure.

The book paints a realistic picture of life and times in Assam during the colonial administration and has challenged the traditional backward society with the new conception of modernity. It incorporates the transmogrification that people in Assam experienced living with a conservative mentality people since a long. Neglecting the discriminative social life of Assam, *Swarnalata* presents a story of three girls who shift themselves to a world that supports women's liberty. Emphasizing the rise of the “new women”, who resisted and opposed patriarchal rules in colonial Assamese culture, Misra has majorly focused on the reason and began to question the tolerance and ignorance of ages-old conservative tradition.

Tilottama Misra compares and contrasts domestic and social realities in Calcutta, the greatest city of the British Empire, and Nagaon, a rural town in Assam. *Swarnalata*, a fictional biography of the famous Barua family, represents a composite picture of life and times in Eastern India during the nineteenth century. The story revolves around the interconnected lives of three women representing different social classes in colonial Assamese society: Swarnalata, Tora, and Lakhipriya. These three women are struggling to comprehend a plan of action while being caught in a social and cultural revolution hurricane, continuing to fight against conflation despite the strange restrictions and difficulties. Among them, Swarnalata is presented as fortunate as she is the daughter of a liberal social reformer, Gunabhiram Barua. He is an English-educated man and a senior government official, influenced by the Brahmo movement. He also advocates widow remarriage and women's education. He decided to shape Swarna as a new age ideal instead of entangling her with the orthodox ideologies of society.

Gunabhiram appoints Panchanan Sharma, a lawyer, and Lakhipriya's father, as Swarnalata's private tutor before sending her to Calcutta, for further studies.

Her parents incorporate in her the values of western enlightenment, civil liberty, and religious tolerance. Her parents had an understanding that learning techniques to view life by adopting the liberal ideas of the modern world does not mean distancing oneself from the principles of Hinduism. Different from Swarnalata, her friend Tora, daughter of Golapi, grows up in a family of Christian converts. Missionaries provide her with a basic education. She has had an ambitious spirit since childhood, and her upbringing with Christian missionaries has inculcated liberal values in her.

Swarnalata used to admire Tora for her ambitious character traits and her psychological qualities. Swarna describes her as a girl with exceptional abilities in both academics and knitting and sewing. Similarly, Gunabhiram, Swarna's father, was impressed with Tora's enthusiasm. He had thought of a progressive and prosperous society led by the girls. Among the three girls, Lakhipriya had many struggles in life.

Panchanan Sharma, the father of Lakhipriya, was a well-educated man but he had no genuine concern for his daughter's education. He was more concerned with settling Lakhipriya's life searching for her life partner instead of educating her. It was not until he began to tutor Swarnalata that he realized the importance of education in his daughter's life. He then starts to bring Lakhipriya to Swarn's home but it is already late as Lakhipriya's marriage was fixed long before. It was late to deny and accept her parent's negligence toward her daughter's future. Unfortunately, an unimaginable tragedy occurs as her husband dies and she has to live a life as a widow. She is compelled to remain in a life of complete austerity following Hindu society's conservative customs for widows.

However, Lakhipriya fights hard against her own family and the rest of society to further her education. She has to be admitted to a boys' school because Nagaon does not have a girls' school at the time. Experiencing, routine torment and

humiliation at boys' school, she excels in her studies and becomes a teacher. She even marries a man of her choice, Dharmakanta, which brings a shock to the families of Nagaon because the second marriage of a widow was equivalent to sin. But the several marriages of men were considered a triumph and does not hesitate to mark women as commodities.

The historical trajectories of Assam might have had several issues in the foreground, but why did the writer valorize women? What was the politics behind rewriting a historical figure? In answering these questions, this research paper, therefore, examines the precise condition of the women by then and strives to present the reason behind the articulation of women as the major character in the novel. Moreover, the paper highlights three major characters: Swarnalata, Tora, and Lakhipriya, who are from different cultural backgrounds in the novel, to evaluate the condition of women. For the theoretical intervention, this research paper will apply a post-colonial study or more specifically use a subaltern perspective by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak as a methodological strand.

Subaltern is a term coined by Italian neo-Marxist Antonio Gramsci to address those social group who lacks autonomous political power. Later on, Ranjit Guha adopted the concept to articulate the subordinated peasants of India, emphasizing the people without powers to raise their voices. Apart from them, post-colonial feminist thinker, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak addressed the term as voiceless marginalized people. In her words, “[a] subaltern is cut off from mobility within both foreign and domestic dominant structures” (3). Spivak argues that subalterns are not constrained within a particular structure of society. Moreover, they are subordinated even in national and international chains of representation. Their presence is deliberately erased from history. Despite a vehement possession and traces of their liveliness, the

dominant structure is powerful enough to eradicate their historical imprints. In relevance to colonial discourse, Spivak contends: “If, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (41). She foregrounds that women in the historical moves are more suppressed and peculiarly sidelined from the historical perspective.

More seriously, in course of historical mobility, women were victimized through discursive whimsicality. To be more precise, as Spivak notes: “. . . the possibility of collectivity itself is persistently foreclosed through the manipulation of female agency” (38). Women, with certain interventions of political and social ideology, are outcasted from the regime of recognition, diluting and contorting their agendas. Because of this evidence, “In so fraught a field, it is not easy to ask the question of the subaltern woman as subject; it is thus all the more necessary to remind pragmatic radicals that such a question is not an idealist red herring” (47). The pathetic condition of women is not a piece of cake to illustrate and answer their thoughtful tempest because “. . . the phased development of the subaltern is complicated by the imperialist project . . .” (38). To make it more clear, the concern of the subaltern is not autonomous and it is not limited to national territory but rather associated with the global phenomenon, domesticated by the Western imperial hegemony. It is, therefore, “[f]or the (gender-unspecified) “true” subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual’s solution is not to abstain from representation” (40). To simplify Spivak, intellectuals must play a pivotal role to construe and relax the way for the subalterns and voice them for their autonomous liberty. Indeed, they have been suppressed for ages; nevertheless, “. . . the history of the unheeded



subaltern must unfold” (30). And in doing so, intellectuals must be the primary mechanism.

Spivakian essence is extensively scattered in Indian history and its literary production. Tilottaoma Misra’s *Swarnalata*, for instance, is a novel that simultaneously encapsulates the colonial history of India and the cultural practices of the Indian people during the mid-19th century Assam, Calcutta. The influence of the British government had brought tremendous transmogrification of Assamese society which has been illustrated in the novel vividly. According to Nandita Khadria, “Historical and administrative sources indicate that a visible growth had taken place in the internal and external commerce following British annexation of Assam in 1826 leading to both generation and redistribution (36). This transparent ballooning of society was, directly and indirectly, affecting the cultural and ceremonial practices of the Assamese people. For instance, Simashree Bora claims that “[t]he 18th and 19th century Assam continued to witness major fractions among the followers of Vaishnavism resulting in establishing more Sattras by various proponents of the religious sect” (55). And this fraction was motivated by several factors. As she further argues, “It was the conflicts of political and cultural domination over one another. Such conflicts and dissatisfactions were not only limited to the Sattras but followers all over Assam were equally affected by the dissemination of religious ideologies (55). Bora’s proposition illuminates that there was a religious dissection and internal conflict that affected the ideological domain of 18th and 19th-century Assam.

Religious conflict or its dissection is only one part of ethnic conflicts during the 19th century, and this conflict has a historical remark. According to Myron Weiner, “The story of Assam’s ethnic conflict begins . . . in 1826 when the British conquered Assam, ending some four hundred years of independence (282). With the

demise of independence, as Weiner further argues, “The British East India Company, with its center in Calcutta, gradually extended its control over the entire northeast region and in 1838 Assam was incorporated into the Bengal Presidency. In 1874 the British separated Assam from Bengal and placed it under the control of a Chief Commissioner with its capital at Shillong” (282). Along with the division of the state, there were sudden shifts in the education system as well. To quote Madhumita Sengupta: “By 1856, government schools were set up at the headquarters of each of the five districts of Assam proper. Further, one English and seven Anglo-vernacular schools were set up at Sylhet. Three Anglo-vernacular schools were set up in Cachar and one in Goalpara” (54). In the name of progression, the Britisher, as D. Nath asserts:

[W]ho encouraged both vertical and horizontal division in the society to avoid any kind of united opposition from the people and took the best advantage of it. So, when the great social reform movement of the 19th century started in Assam, the state was already handicapped with innumerable social problems like caste and untouchability, child marriage and widow remarriage, opium addiction, etc. (706)

D. Nath’s words, in a critical sense, exemplify that the Britisher was one of the prominent reasons who initiated the social imbalance in Assamese society. This disruption was hazardous enough that even the reformation failed to rectify it. His assessment also hints that in the 19th century, there was a voluminous amount of social inequality and evil practices constantly deteriorating among Assamese people.

However, some instances were positive in terms of social integrity and gender roles. For instance, according to Jahnabi Gogoi Nath, “Dissolution of marriage was also permissible on the initiative of either of the women or the men without any

difference in social legitimacy. Even children born outside the wedlock were not unacceptable to society. Widow remarriage was common amongst most of the castes except perhaps the Brahmans till the 19th century” (380). Moreover, there were certain attempts and reforms to control unhealthy social practices. As Nath asserts:

Since the 19th century, there had been opposition to child marriage in India and the consummation of the marriage of girls below the age of puberty . . . . The social reformers pressured British authorities to append a clause in the Indian panel code in 1861 that defined statutory rape as a sexual relationship with a woman-married or unmarried, below the age of ten. (823)

Nath’s information convinces us that some affirmative actions took place during the 19th century. Uncommonly, with the emergence of British power, Assam—along with the state—was gradually marching towards a new direction. In these historical backdrops, the novel enters the discursive realm of 19th-century Assamese historicity. Capturing the authenticity of the social phenomenon, the novel *Swarnalata* articulates the dynamics of the then-Assamese society. In a similar light, Udayan Misra, the translator of the text, in the introductory section writes, “. . . *Swarnalata* is a moving portrait of social flux and transformation that marked the closing decades of nineteenth century Assam and Bengal and which set the stage for the birth of the succeeding age” (i). The moving plot of the autobiographical novel explains the situation of the Assamese people who were in the process of change and in a dilemma of becoming ambivalent men.

Tilottoma Misra articulated women from a different perspective in such a confusing situation. When society was gradually moving toward prosperity, the novel characterizes women as central characters to depict the social facets. Women in Indian history have been in a subservient position since the beginning. It would not be

wrong to say that women are the sufferer since the origination of human civilization and it has been vividly portrayed in literary texts. Among several texts that picturizes the vulnerable position of women in society, Tilottoma Misra's *Swarnalata* also descriptively picturizes the position and the dilapidated situation that women had to experience because of the dominance of conventional thoughts. Taking the stand of Gayatri Spivak, Rujuta Chincholkar-Mandelia writes, "The subaltern Hindu woman's identity is shaped and molded within (and by) the patriarchal discourse" (197). Women dearth the quality of creating themselves into the desired shape as they are forced to stay into the fist of men. He, furthermore, adds:

Patriarchal codes in power work to justify her subject position as a "subaltern" Hindu woman and thereby validate her subordination, identity, and subjectivity within Hindu society. In doing so, the Hindu woman's identity is always seen through the lenses of the male psyche and, as a result, Hindu women begin to view themselves and their agency through patriarchal laws and confinements. (197-198)

Women have no proper existence rather they are introduced as the puppet of the male figure in society. They are compelled to live a life in a double-effaced form and consistently will be regarded as wimps. Through Lakhipriya, one of the woman characters in the novel, Misra has described the condition of women in society. The members of her family are of conventional thoughts because of which she is compelled to live merely within the four spaces. Even though her father, Panchanan Sharma, was an educator, his thoughts regarding education for women were old-fashioned. Misra inscribes the intention of people when the topic of education for women was brought into the discussion. She writes:

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. (18)

The above statement describes that education in the life of women is addressed as a miniature concept. The private sphere was merely known for women and since their childhood was inclined within the domestic spheres. According to Padmini Swaminathan, “Education for women was regarded as a means to improve their status within the family and not to equip them to play any role in the wider social context’ (34). The statement collides with the concept of Lakhipriya’s father, Sharma, who considers education merely as the opportunity that the male figures have to acquaint themselves to live a better life and female should live protecting and preserving their husband’s treasures. This makes it clear that society rejects the deliverance of a sense of liberty to women but rather focuses to make life complex rejecting their basic needs. Moreover, Lakhipriya's father's decision to find his daughter a groom instead of a concern about her education illustrates the prevalence of the prejudiced form in women. In the words of Misra, “For his daughter his only concern was to find a suitable groom and get her married at the earliest” (29). This describes the condition of women in society and elaborates that women were considered an object rather than the subject who had no role to bring transformation in society.

Sharma being an educator had ideas that no woman should be treated unfairly. He accepts that women have equal access as men to acquaint knowledge and wisdom but his actions and thoughts towards Lakhipriya say distinct and to which Misra writes, “How would the household run if his daughter were to take to studies, Sarma

reflected” (19). The statement clarifies Sharma’s anxiety about the incompleteness of the household chores. This also projects that he has no concern about the horrendous circumstances he has to witness for not educating her daughter. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow” (41), and the life of Laxhipriya is undoubtedly hovered by the patriarchal shadow because of her father's rigidity. Even though Sharma’s ideologies changed, he realized that he was being unjust to Laxhipriya by denying her education and brought Laxhipriya to Swarnalata’s place so that she learns and knows the importance of education, it was worthless.

It was late enough for Sharma to amend the mistake of not permitting her to explore the world of education because her marriage was fixed. Laxhipriya was the victim of the negligence that elder members of her family committed. Her husband died. She had to live a life as a widow. The quote of Spivak illustrates the condition of Laxhipriya in a descriptive form which says, “the subordinated gender following the dominant within the challenge of nationalism while remaining caught within gender oppression is not an unknown story” (39). The oppression of the women group in society is not a new thing. They were considered subservient and there is no change in their condition. Being confined within the whims of the dominant group of the society, Laxhipriya was compelled to live adversities-filled life following the conservative customs for widows that were prevalent in Hindu society then.

The text with the depiction of the vulnerable situation of women also accompanies the ideas of liberation. It tries to illustrate that although the perceptions, voices, and opportunities of women in society are squashed there remain agencies in society to uprise the compressed situation. This is also an indication that there is an agency that helps the subaltern to speak. In Swarnalata, Guanbhiram, Swarnalata’s

father, plays the role of an agency as he paves the way to liberate women and let them pursue their preferences. As Spivak writes, “The agency was always male; the woman was always the victim. The dubious place of the free will of the constituted sexed subject as female was successfully effaced” (57). As females have no identical space in society they are the ones to be in problematic situations and males are there as a rescuer and domineer. This indicates that agency is dispersed in society in various forms and one has to recognize it and walk on the respective paths for the achievement of liberation.

Gunabhiram’s actions can be comprehended as an alternative mode of creating agency in a society where women’s aspirations are squashed. Through the liberated perspectives of Gunabhiram, the novel sets a bridge for the revolution in the history of Assamese village. Gunabhiram’s action of being, “married a Brahmin widow named Bishnupriya Devi . . .” (11) shatters the conventional thoughts of the society. The Brahmin community’s strictness regarding widow remarriage can be attributed to their adherence to traditional Hindu religious practices and beliefs. In Hinduism, marriage is considered a sacred bond that is believed to continue even after death. According to M.N. Srinivas, “the strictness of Brahmins regarding widow remarriage can be attributed to their belief in the concept of “sati,” which is the practice of a widow immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre” (119). Although the practice of sati was abolished in the 19th century, its influence on Brahmin beliefs and practices is still evident. Srinivas writes, "The Brahmins were the most ardent supporters of sati, and the end of the practice did not mean that the belief in its necessity and the honor it brought to the family were abandoned. Thus, the widow's remarriage is opposed not only by those who fear that a remarried woman will bring

disgrace to her family, but also by those who believe that she will be acting against religious sanctions" (121).

Furthermore, the Brahmin community's strictness regarding widow remarriage can also be attributed to their desire to maintain their social status and purity. Brahmins are considered to be the highest caste in the Hindu social hierarchy, and their strict adherence to traditional religious practices is seen as a way to maintain their social and cultural superiority.

Moreover, the thoughts he distributes to the people include, "I have no apprehensions about sending anyone to the Christians for education. One should be liberal in such matters. The missionaries teach in the Western style and there is much to learn from that teaching too" (15). Through the statement, it is clear that he carries a sense of integrity and keeps no disputation between religions. He believes in acquainting ideas from every aspect and implementing it into societies for optimistic transformation. Moreover, he adds, "All these years we have never had women's education in Assam. It's only the Christians who are giving some attention to this matter and we should be happy about it" (15). The statement reveals Gunabhiram's intention for the type of education provided to girls with no segregation based on religion.

The initiation marks the creation of a new dimension through which he is trying to formulate autonomy among dominated women. His role can also be interpreted as intellectual to which Tabugon, Garry B. writes, "these intellectuals lead their class into the greater consciousness of their both lives. Thus, far from being like the traditional ones, their intellectual activity is . . . no longer an exterior mover of feelings and passions but active participants in particular life, as a constructor, as an



organizer and permanent persuader” (79). Gunabhiram’s performance as an intellectual picturizes him as an individual who is in greater consciousness and does not forbid wage a battle against the oppressors to let women live their life. His orientation to mark consciousness in Assamese society consists of making people aware and helping in the formation of the identity that has been clustered within the male groups of society. Gunabhiram, in the novel, has a daughter: Swarnalata, one of the female characters around which the plot of the novel has been developed. Swarnalata is portrayed as fortunate one among three major female characters in the novel. Being a daughter of a social reformer, she has no restrictions to pursuing education and acquaint knowledge.

She was taught through a private tutor: Panchanan Sarma, Lakhirpriya’s father who was a lawyer but was more concerned about his son’s education than that of his daughter. After pursuing basic education from Sarma, she was sent to Calcutta for further education. Moreover, her parents were much supportive and were aware of the essentiality of education in one’s life, especially the life of women. Swarnalata’s father, “deeply believed in shedding one’s petty prejudices and in learning to view the world in the light of modern liberal ideas brought in by Western education. But, for that, he did not see any need to give up his Hindu faith” (17). Swarnalata was lucky enough to have parents who incorporated the values of Western enlightenment, civil liberty, and religious tolerance because “both Bishnupriya and he had wished to shape her as an ideal of the new age” (50) and they also had a comprehension that one can adopt the liberal views of the modern world to view life no matter which religious principles they are most aligned to.

However, Swarnalata’s life cannot be interpreted as all plain sailing. To have the enthusiasm to pursue education during the era when there was a dearth of

opportunities, neglect, and dominance of oppressiveness in societies was a real challenge. Sagar Bourah writes, “As elsewhere in India, in Assam too the women remained a neglected class. The widely prevalent proverb "Nari Patar talar laow" (Women are like the guard covered with leaves) is the best reflection of the disinclining attitude of men towards women” (716). There were conservative and dehumanizing attitudes about women in the nation.

In a similar instance, the concept of education for women was regarded as preposterous. Misra, in the novel, presents the thought of the people of Assam that says, “Educated women were by and large thought to be women of ill repute. They spent their leisure time reading bad books” (31). Education was considered an ill factor that would make women’s life like a hell. The thoughts of people regarding girls were more confined to their marriage. People thought that “a girl is considered grown-up the moment she enters her tenth year. She’ll be attaining puberty in a year or two. If one keeps on waiting for girls to be educated, then the marriage age will pass. Society will scorn us if we can’t get our daughters married in time” (55). This statement clarifies that education was considered an antonym of marriage. Parents would prefer to fix the marriage of a girl but would forbid educating her.

To address this, Gunabhiram had raised his voice for the education of women in the region but it was unheard of and unpractised even after twenty years of it which was a feeling of dismay. Educating women was a matter of fear, shame, and negligence for the people in Assam. Jahnabi Gihoi Nath writes, “They feared that Western education would make girls idle, luxury-loving and unfit for household work. They would then demand domestic help who would be beyond the means of most middle-class Assamese babus” (817). Instead of appreciating the changing values and ideas, males had a fear of being replaced by women.

They do not want to be a companion but rather treat women as subservient objects which they desire for frequent use. To this, Maya Pandit writes, “The Brahminical position of the state, in tune with the cultural agenda of the rightist parties, was reflected in its insistence that there is only one unified, cohesive, moral and cultural way of life for society as defined by the corrupting normative patriarchal brahminical family” (36). The conservative rules that the patriarchy has imposed have filled the lives of women with turbulence. They are deprived of their rights and aspirations, their voices are squashed so that they remain the puppet of the patriarchy. To impose oppressiveness upon females patriarchal men have formulated self-developed cultural instances. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's statement justifies the motives of dominant groups as she writes, “Opposition to female emancipation in the name of cultural sanctions is as onerous” (333). Culture stands as the formidable opponent to letting females live with an intimate liberation. In the novel, Misra projects culture as a troublesome unit through Lakhipriya's story. Her aspirations are crushed because of the parents' thirst to get their daughter married instead of educating her which as a consequence “had cast a shadow over her life” (Misra 83). Lakhipriya's wedding which was thought to spread happiness rather dimmed her happiness and positioned her to an effaced itinerary.

How the society was and the preassumed conceptions of people on women in the then society can be illustrated through the words of Nandini Bhattacharya as she writes, “for themselves, in an attempt to claim equal or more proficiency in the masculine activities of governing the colony and its resources, an ill-defined dream . . . the women ethnographers, however, needed to resist identification as "mere women," tied to their bodies and their domestic functions” (290). Women's identification has been limited to the definition that the male members of society have

dispersed. They are considered no-name characters alive in societies. To create an identity where males have spread their dominance, women have to construct and invent them in a discursive forum themselves.

However, in the novel, one of the major female characters, Tora, daughter of Golapi and Sendura, has been presented as the one who grows up in a family of Christian converts. She is portrayed as the one who, “was not in her nature to shrink from any situation. If she wanted to do something, she would do it without any hesitation” (23). As she was taught to express her ideas and thoughts instead of keeping herself confined within four walls, she had bold character traits that were opposed to the conventional ideas that the Hindu religion had structured for women. Tora has been described as one to whom no, “one could equal —whether it was singing, sewing, knitting or studies Tora was unparalleled” (35). Tora was an unbeatable character in terms of education as well as things that are characterized as feminine. She grew up in a liberated society because of which she had no chance of being manipulated and oppressed by people with conventional thoughts.

The way Swarnalata, Tora, and Lakhipriya have been presented in the novel has succeeded in constructing their name even though the agency was male. To be more precise, Swarnalata obtained education from a personal tutor and went to Calcutta to acquire knowledge amidst the period when women were considered filthy and no doubt they had no permission for education. Swarnalata debunked the conservative ideology that was prevalent in society. Similar to her, Tora's enthusiasm cannot be rejected. As she walked paths where women were treated equally, their education was valued, and her psychology was guided by liberal values. She also used to work with the missionaries and if questioned whether she is afraid to attend missionaries, she would reply, "What is there to be afraid of?" Tora replied defiantly.

“I will go with the missionaries. Even the waves of the ocean respect them. The moment they call upon Lord Jesu, no harm can befall anyone” (36). Tora's admiration and enthusiasm for the missionaries reflect her attitude toward the change. Moreover, it also symbolizes her thought of bringing change in the conservative ideologies of societies through missionaries.

Swarnalata and Tora succeeded to uprise themselves from the labyrinth of the orthodoxical society despite being the subaltern because of the agency. Without the agency they would even have to live a suppressed life alike other women because as J. Maggio writes, “Thus the amalgamation of the two notions of representation establishes a silencing of the subaltern. They can never speak because they are both being "stood in for" and "embodied" by others in the dominant discourse” (422). As these two ladies were living their life under male dominance, their positionality in society was always in ignorance. Swarnalata was only able to go to Calcutta for her education because of her father's thoughts and efforts. In a similar instance, Tora was able to live her dream to visit America because she was stubborn to accomplish Bronson sahib to America. To this, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes, “For the "true" subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation” (285). A subaltern is always in need of an intellectual to represent themselves in society. As the identity of the subaltern remains on the edge of the sword, they can neither speak nor represent themselves, therefore, an intellectual is required. In the novel as well, to let Swarnalata and Tora grow up with no oppression and get disturbed by the silencing factors, there is an effort of men. Gunabhiram is Swarnalata's agency because of which she has been able to get to

Calcutta and Bronson Shaib has supported Tora to represent herself and live her dream.

Besides this, Lakhipriya also slapped the patriarchal notion prevalent in the then society. She has been depicted with liberated thought which can be illustrated by the statement she asked, “If there is no harm in a man marrying a second time, what is wrong if a woman does it?” (Misra 81). This clarifies she has liberated thoughts despite she was compelled to live in an oppressive society. However, she had to experience domination for being a woman as well as a widow. As she had to live a torment-filled life after being a widow, it was Panchanan Sarma, her father who helped her fight for her rights and let her go to a school to educate herself. Even though the entire family was objecting to the need to educate the widow Sarma “stubbornly stood by his decision and discussed the matter with Charushila Sen, the Headmistress of the Bengali school, and fixed Lakhi’s admission into her school” (91). The divisions that the world follows are an attempt to corrupt women’s abilities and capabilities, therefore, it is a woman herself who has to work to balance the contradictions. To this, Alan Ramon Ward writes, “the existence of “woman” only protects us by forcing an organized vigilance against the woman herself” (3). Women have to stand up for themselves so that they can bring about the desired change. At the time, Lakhipriya was crushed and labeled as unlucky when her husband died, there was Bishnupriya to support her with her words, in which she said:

You are not to be blamed for all this, my girl. Life and death are nature’s laws. No one can change them. It is wrong to think that a girl’s life comes to an end the moment 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. (87)

The way Bishnupriya supports Lakhipriya at the time when she was being cursed after the death of her husband projects that women have to plot their way to liberation on their own. To eradicate contradictions in society is essential because according to Nadia Urbinati, “the contradiction between the individual and the social world is seen as the source of both existential unhappiness and political evil, the ultimate goal has to be that of attaining a conclusive recomposition of every contradiction” (373-374). Permitting Lakhipriya to live her aspirations amidst the contradictory perspectives, Sarma initiated the formation of the society in a different manner.

He admitted Lakhipriya to acquire an education at a boys’ school as the village, Nagaoun had a school for boys only overshadowing the controversies prevalent in society to not let women march forward. Experiencing hardships, and humiliation throughout her presence in boys’ school, she succeeded and became a teacher. Moreover, she crushed conservative thoughts regarding the re-marriage of a widow in Hindu society marrying a man, Dharmakanta, and she fell in love. The re-marriage of a widow was considered sinful in Hindu society. The novel profoundly relegates women to the subordinated categories of people in the social realm during the then time.

Presenting the subordination and the way they experienced their intimate liberation, the novel also disperses the necessity of power in society. Women in society are liberated merely when power is on their support. Unless power supports them they would not be able to foster in their space. To this, Andrew Cayton writes, “Power was omnipresent and inequality a permanent feature of any society; to pretend otherwise was folly”(298). There is no society without power. There is the presence of a powerful domain in society because of which actions and practicalities are formulated. The way Swarnalata and Tora are able to uprise in society, Lakhipriya is

not because she has no support of power in her space. But, when she is supported through the power of her father she received the chance to kiss liberation.

This can also be comprehended that in society, women remain in a liminal space, and once they are provided a chance they can be a representative of society. As Margaret Stacey and Marion Price mentions, “The women, therefore, it seems are important in their domain and, through their power in this domain they can influence the public domain of the men. Although they lack public power, as totally as any women anywhere they are not powerless” (40). Women, in themselves, cannot be labeled as powerless. But, to function as power their power, they need the help of men. Men work as an agency as they are the dominant group in society. Through their support, if women are accompanied, they have abilities to utilize the chances they are provided and can march to their liberated space.

Males' work is labeled as essential from both attributes. They play a dominant role in suppressing the women and also liberating them they have a vital role. The reality in which women are sustaining their life is based on the foundation philosophized by the males. Indeed, the historical references are conspicuous that women have ever been the doer whereas males are imposters of the female regimes in the social atmosphere. As Graciela Hierro and Ivan Marquez argue, “The history of feminine oppression is supported and legitimized by a concrete morality, the morality of patriarchy which is based on a hierarchy of fixed values that regulate, distribute, inherit, and transmit the power or dominion of this group of men over others” (173-174). Women are suppressed through the morality that males impose on them. They subordinate women through the formation of customs and social as well as political institutions. These happenings are one of the crucial aspects represented in the novel. While Sarma presents his thoughts to take Lkhipriya to Swarnalata's home so that she



gets an education, Lakhipriya's family, "firmly declared that a Brahmin girl should never read or write. Besides, if people came to know that the girl was being allowed to visit the unclean house of the Hakim-saheb it would become virtually impossible to get her married into a respectable family" (31). Girls of the then society were not allowed even to pursue education. It was believed that the girls should merely be confident within the four walls of their house and have mastery in household chores as it is the thing that girl needs as they will have to go to their in-laws. Tilottoma Mishra is articulating the social reality which is prevalent in society ever since it was formulated. The point is in depicting the condition of women, Mishra is vehemently disrobing the dark secret in which women are undoubtedly penalized by the patriarchal domain. The logic of society in which girls are expected to be maintaining their position to be married to the one whom she deserves serves the bitter reality of a male-dominated society in which women are examined and males are the examiners.

In this relevance, a reality in which women are trapped and Tilottama wants to penetrate is the cultural values embedded in social practices. To be more precise, there are many more social and cultural intertwines that provoke women to stabilize themselves within the grip of males, and in doing so males are the master to hegemonize them. In the words of R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Without a very clear focus on this issue of historical change, the idea of hegemony would be reduced to a simple model of cultural control. And in a great deal of the debate about gender, large-scale historical change is not in focus" (831). This is to say the process of hegemony plays an important role in monitoring the gender debate and the subversion of historical records. Indeed, males and females are an integral part of society and they are indispensable. They should be acknowledged equally in every domain of society. Instead of understanding them as binary, should they be realized as

a supplement to one another? Mishra, depicting Swarnalata's father as the agency is trying to reflect males as supplementary to women.

The two leading characters Swarnalata and Tora are supported by their fathers from the very beginning and in the case of Lakhipriya whose life was filled with chaos because of neglecting the need for education, was accompanied by her father in the latter part of the novel. Through this, the necessity of agency is dispersed. Björkdahl, Annika, and Johanna Mannergren Selimovic write, "The agency that women are able to exercise in the space of transitional justice is more than reflections of existing discursive frameworks or circulating scripts. Through their transformative, critical, and creative agency they negotiate ideas about 'whose justice' and 'justice for whom'" (166).

Indeed, the societal discourses are the creations of males. The ritualistic process of women in the homely periphery and the code of conduct imbued by the male character in the family, in the novel, rigorously resonates with the prevalent practices with which women are associated. For instance, When Panachanan Sarma was amazed to witness Swarna's intelligence because it shattered his perceptions that girls possess less intelligence than boys, ". . . for his daughter his only concern was to find a suitable groom and get her married at the earliest (Misra 29). The dialogue resembles the conventional notion rooted in the social periphery that stereotypes women merely as family members whose function is to marry and be servants of the males. Indeed, these social beliefs are not merely an utterance but rather a rule created by social intelligence. More importantly, Thomas Bodenheimer, reflecting Antonio Gramsci's assumption, describes their role in the following ways:

. . . the subaltern functions of the traditional intellectuals are extremely important in promulgating throughout all of society the worldview of the

dominant class. Both in the educational system and through the media, they tell us what to learn, which books to read, what portions of our history we should know about and what not, how our government and economy works for us, how working class people are stupid and lazy, . . . .” (22)

The intellectuals who are working in the doctrine of dominant values are the traditional intellectuals. Instead of opposing the conventional assumptions, they rather emphasize and implement the conventions as regulations. To be more specific, as Bodenheimer further argues, “. . . the traditional intellectuals legitimize the ruling class to spread their ideas with compelling authority” (22-23). In other words, these traditional intellectuals are social actors who legalize and serve the interest of the dominant. In this sense, Panachanan Sarma is a traditional intellectual who is accepting the dominant values deployed by the patriarchal society. More precisely, Panachanan Sarma, being a male, is authenticating males' prescriptions as they are the facts.

Panachanan Sarma is a microcosm that resonates with the so-called intellectuals of a patriarchal society. In the name of societal values, they merely subordinate the powerless and work for the benefit of power to prolong their dominance. However, it is not to argue all the intellectuals in society are traditional or slaves of the powerful but rather it is equally important to understand “[t]he working class, too, has its intellectuals, whom Gramsci calls organic intellectuals. Each rising class in history has developed a new stratum of organic intellectual” (Bodenheimer 23). The intellectuals who are in favor of the margins or subalterns are the organic intellectuals. They constantly address the situations of the margins and help them to penetrate the discourse through which subalterns can disrupt the regime of the dominants. Gunabhiram’s organic intellectualism can be seen in his critique of the

traditional caste system, in the novel. He speaks out against the practice of untouchability and advocates for social equality, stating: “It’s high time we got rid of this caste system. How long are we going to perpetuate it? Just because someone is born into a certain caste, they’re considered impure? That’s a bunch of nonsense!” (52). He considers the tag of impurity that people have received as a matter of disgust. He also challenges the gender norms of his society and fights for women’s rights. He believes that women should have the same opportunities as men and that they should be allowed to pursue their dreams. He states, “Why shouldn’t women have the same opportunities as men? Why shouldn’t they be able to study and work? Why should they be forced into marriage and motherhood before they’re ready?” (136). Ghunahabrim was against the segregation thoughts of people among men and women. For him, both must be treated in an equal manner. In a similar instance, his organic intellectualism can be seen in his efforts to promote education and literacy among the people in his community. He establishes a school and encourages both boys and girls to attend, stating, “Education is the key to progress. If we want to improve our community, we need to educate our children. Boys and girls both have the right to learn and grow” (91). To achieve progress in society, education must be prioritized. Educating children, regardless of gender, is crucial.

Mishra illustrates Gunabhiram to depict an organic intellectual foreshadowing his quality and aspiration that demands emancipation from social injustice. To recall Mishra, “It was Gunabhiram who had first taught her to stand up against social injustice, not merely through debates and discussions, but through courageous action in one’s own life” (62). Moreover, the novel projects the philosophical domain of organic intellectuals, highlighting how they can be the agency for the voiceless. For instance, when Gunabhiram asked Tora about her interest to study in a normal school

he was fascinated with her answer and replied, “If only all our girls had similar aims in life, then our society would have progressed fast. But we should blame ourselves for this. We bring up our girls so that they are fit only for household chores. We don’t allow any other idea to enter their heads” (65). Gunabhiram’s words vocalize the necessity of women's education for the development of society. He believes that the parents are themselves the responsible factors who are derailing the ways of women’s goals.

Tilottama’s motif to project characters like Gunabhiram is to necessitate organic intellectuals to liberate women from social evils. Gunabhiram’s acknowledgment as the culprit to subordinate women is a profound resistance and consciousness that foreshadows men as the obstruction to women’s redemption. In this relevance, Tilottama Mishra’s novel is a meaningful articulation of society where different intellectual agency function in different ways. Panachanan Sarma and Gunabhiram are traditional and organic intellectuals respectively where the former represents the middleman of the dominant and the latter represents the voice of the voiceless.

Tilottama’s emphasis on Gunabhiram symbolically triggers why social conventions are matters to change. He is not merely a fictional character, instead, he is the demand of a society in which women are marginalized. It is through organic intellectuals like Gunabhiram that justice is possible. Therefore, Mishra’s politics to depict Gunabhiram is to show how agency subverts the dark factors and hegemonic tendencies to be depleted. In this connection, Carole Counihan writes, “Gramsci’s point was that blind acceptance of one's common sense structure leads to perpetuation of the world as is, to its passive acceptance and reduplication. This is a negation of the human essence - which is to be active, to be creative, and hence to be critical” (5).

The social presumption should not be accepted as it is rendered. Before accepting the values, disseminated in social locations, the evaluation of the messages is necessary. In relevance to the novel, Mishra implicitly exposes this message through the voice of Gunabhiram.

*Swarnalata* typifies women in a vulnerable situation within the domain of the novel. However, it does not fail to address the possibility to overcome the problem that they are indulged with. Indeed, the novel strongly evokes a sense of women's freedom and the need for organic intellectuals to liberate them because as Elisabeth Porter contends, “. . . women's empowerment leads to a range of practical manifestations of agency in community life. Women's participation in decision-making at all levels is a crucial outcome of, and vehicle for, empowerment (6). If women are given chance they can be the agency for the other marginal groups. They can identify their location and they can voice themselves. To be more precise, if women are opportune, in the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “For the "figure" of woman, the relationship between woman and silence can be plotted by women themselves; race and class differences are subsumed under that charge” (287). The result of subaltern liberation can welcome enormous transformation than it is expected. Thus, for this transmogrification, “. . . a subaltern will for globalization can be put together as justification for policy” (Spivak 332). Women, though they are in fragile condition, are not supple as they are thought in social discourses. There are works yet to be done for their liberation, and this initiation must be taken by the organic intellectuals.

In conclusion, the foundation of Tilottama Mishra's novel *Swarnalata* captures the essence of the then period when India was withstanding British encroachment tremendously. On the other hand, it articulates the evil practices

prevalent in the society where women were victimized the most. Women in the novel are vulnerable but not intrinsically but because they are made vulnerable by the patriarchal notion instigated by males to hegemonize them. Males compel females to adhere and walk on the way paved by them. They bind women with the formations of such code of conduct that do not let women live their aspirations. Women are compelled to live a life of puppets and walk on discriminatory cultural instances disseminated by males.

The purpose of writing *Swarmala* amidst the historical turbulences seems to be rewriting historical evidence which illuminates women despite being subordinated, they were facilitated by some ideal male for their emancipation and liberation. In other words, women indeed were neutralized in terms of the voice they had to have which was curtailed by the dominant ruling male in association with the colonialism regime. Nevertheless, women were internally reinforced and charged by the current generated by some representative males.

However, women are not in the marginal line. To be precise, the marginality in which they are compelled to live can be blurred if they receive voluntary agency. To liberate women, permanent persuaders like Gunabhrim plays a prominent role and they are necessary. Women are kept in subservient positions by males themselves and also released by them. Males are the rule creators and breakers. In both these cases, males are on the beneficial side. This role can be best illustrated through the performances of Prachana Sarma, in the novel because his decisions have hovered a shadow in Lakhipriya's life through the fixation of marriage and it was he to go against the norms of society and educate her widow daughter admitting to the only boys' school in the village. This projects that the liberty of women is ultimately in the

grip of males, men, and women are not binary but rather supplement each other, and also males are an agency.



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