



Giving Voice to the Subaltern Women: A Study of Arupa Patangiya Kalita's *Felanee and Ayananta*

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Abstract

Women are supposed to be passive, inferior and dependent on their counterpart i.e. men and are often relegated to the position of the other. They are silenced throughout history as their stories are told by someone more powerful in position, credibility and mostly, gender role. It is mostly noticed that subaltern women by reason of their positional status and often disputed and politicized identity, lack the proper and genuine depiction of their lived realities and emotions in the narratives of literature too. Lacking their voice, they hover around misrepresentation or sometimes non-representation which creates a hollow space in between the reflected notion and the truth of their fates. Therefore, it appears as an interesting and significant question to see whether in any narrative, the subaltern women are given enough freedom to express themselves in their own language or whether it is possible to give voice to the subaltern women in any narration. This paper is an attempt to search for this same concern in the two novels Felanee and Ayananta by one of the notable Assamese writers, Arupa Patangiya Kalita. The woman characters here in these two novels are victims of the different patriarchal societal structures and norms, but they are neither submissive nor lost in their paths of life. The female characters in Felanee are further marginalized for their class and identity origin. Both these two novels are interesting documents of such women characters whose voices reach the ears of the readers. Therefore, this paper will further analyze whether the author has justifiably represented the subaltern women in these two select novels.

Keywords: Subaltern, Other, Silence, Representation, Submissiveness.

The word 'subaltern' means 'an officer in the British army below the rank of captain, especially a second lieutenant' when it is used as a noun and anyone 'of lower status' when used as an adjective as defined by the Oxford dictionary. It was Antonio Gramsci, one of the most influential Marxist critics, who first coined this term in order to mean groups of people who are positioned under hegemonic strategy of more powerful groups of people. But, as a distinct genre of study, Subaltern studies developed only after the academic and purpose oriented activities executed by a bunch of academicians and historians led by Ranjit Guha. David Ludden in the introduction to *Reading Subaltern Studies* traces the trajectory of the development of subaltern studies as an area of study throughout the ages, right from its time



of initiation. He points out that “Subaltern studies began its impressive career in England at the end of the 1970s, when conversations on subaltern themes among a small group of English and Indian historians led to a proposal to launch a new journal in India” (1). But, as the time passed, it attained an Indian label due to its more inclination towards the colonial and postcolonial Indian subjects and themes. Moreover, there could be seen an ocean of contribution to this field from the Indian critics and scholars like Dipesh Chakravarty, Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey, Binay Bhushan Choudhury, Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak and so on. However, Ludden asserts that “There is no one intellectual history of subalternity and never could be, because it lives on local ground in disparate readings” (17). Thus, subalternity and its study is not only a concern of a single country or society, but it is always present in every power structure containing one group which is more powerful and another which is supposed to be less powerful.

However, as Krupa Sandilya cites in his essay “Writing/Reading the subaltern woman: Narrative voice and subaltern agency in Upamanyu Chatterjee’s *English, August*”, “the narrative of subalternity is always already subsumed by the discursive power of patriarchy, imperialism and nationalism, which purport to both represent (in terms of politics) and re-present (in terms of artistic renditions) the subaltern subject” (Sandilya, 1). Keeping this context in view, the study of gender concern can also be made possible because, a clearly visible boundary line is drawn between the males and females on the basis of their sex, the culture and society where they live. Females are the supposed inferiors in this space who often gets muted and marginalized because of the over dominance of patriarchal inclinations. This marginalization is intensified if they belong to any subaltern group, be it racial, economic, cultural or ethnic. Such groups of people are intentionally or politically relegated to a space of nothingness or rather their voices are not let to be heard throughout the process of writing and framing history.

Women who experience subordination for their gender identity, is doubly silenced and victimized because of which critics like Gayatri C. Spivak, Kamala Visweswaran, Tejaswini Niranjana and their followers brought forth gender under the study of subalternity. Women are demoted to a subaltern space which is “characterized by its invisibility and externality to capitalism” (22) as observed by D’ Angello about Spivak’s considerate approach of subaltern space in her essay “Subaltern and Marginal Figures in Literature”. For Spivak, a subaltern space is the position of those ‘removed from all lines of social mobility’ and ‘inhabits the space of difference’ (19) as cited by D’ Angello in her above cited essay. Thus, women are subalterns not only because of the gendered identity, but also because of the fact of their being disregarded and state of disconnection essentially from the overall social narrative. Apart from the common experiences of suffering, women have layers of separate and distinguished experiences of subjugation, submissiveness and the state of being the Other, as they are bound to inhabit in a deserted space only meant for them. They lack proper representation in history as well as in any national narrative.

Their stories are partially reflected or incorrectly documented because; they themselves are not provided the ground to tell the tales of their own self. It is someone other



who undertakes this task, that someone who is always superior to them in position, power and identity. In such documents, the women characters seem to accept their state of being a marginal character as they are seldom given a voice which is further stated by Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” as:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the “third world woman” caught between tradition and modernization. (306)

Spivak, though discusses these concerns in the context of post colonialism and imperialism and as a reaction to Guha’s concept of subaltern study, her assertions are very significant to understand the condition of subaltern women both theoretically and practically. Her statement about the impossibility of the subalterns’ speaking of their own selves is groundbreaking as it not only sensitizes the perspective towards the subaltern people but also paves way for further research to see whether any alternate aspect is traceable or not.

However, Spivak herself discusses the possibility of finding such an alternate way whereby the subalterns can be given a space to voice themselves and it is literature for that sake. Any literary text is distinguishable from historical documents because, here the authors exercise the authority to let the characters speak about themselves in their own diction and move according to their own desire inside the text. The authors are just mouthpieces for them who help in painting their stories in the authentic way. Thus, it can be stated that subaltern women can also apparently get their voices echoed in literature just like Spivak believes that literature can provide a platform to female characters to express their selves. Isabella D’ Angelo in her above cited essay discusses Spivak’s understanding of a literary text where she says that “Spivak insists on texts’ capacity to let the subaltern woman remain incommensurable, rather than a symbol for something else or a conceptual figure. This is achieved through a valuable creation of a space for subalternity”(19).

So, literature creates an uncorrupted space for the subalterns where they can exercise their right to speak for themselves, thereby helping their stories to reach the readers of the mainstream narratives. This paper attempts to see whether the two selected novels by Arupa Patangiya Kalita serve purposefully in giving voice to the subaltern women. If yes, how the writer has created that subject space for the women characters to let them be the speakers of their own stories so as to enliven the true picture of those women’s lives.

Arupa Patangiya kalita, an amazing story teller from the Northeast India, has contributed many short stories and novels which are beautifully crafted in the author’s signature narrative style. Her fictional writings are rich with the local and regional rudiments of the Northeast, its culture, sociological realities, historical details and the kind of human relationship the people share in this specific landmass. Thematically, her texts are pregnant with meanings and stylistically, they are more enriching because, they provide multiple dimensions to justify and dissect her stories to see whether they employ the age old traditional narrative structures or they promote experimental modern narrative styles to explore her world. The two selected novels *Ayananta* and *Felanee* fit into this juncture of the



author's approach which further makes possible a study of subalternity in both the two texts. The female characters in both these two novels differ from one another in their courage, strength and the stances they take for their own selves. Some of them are very much active and vocal in their prospect of life and some are silent and patient sufferers of the pitiful conditions of their lives which they accept unquestionably as their fates. But, they commonly experience subalternity of different intensity. Firstly, none of them got a mention in any historical testimony as they hail from some remote rural or semi-urban areas. Secondly, they are marginalized humans whose life stories are left unraveled; thereby pushing them towards an insignificant subaltern position. Thirdly, they are subalterns both for their gender identity and the ethnicity and class they represent. The female characters in *Ayananta* are of two categories: the first includes the maternal aunts of the protagonist, Ruma Baideo, the wife of the freedom struggler, the protagonist's mother who seems to be accepting their lives as it appeared to them. They are neither seen to be claiming their rights nor questioning the confining norms and rituals.

They seemingly compromise and surrender to the life given to them by the culture and society they are part of. The second category is constituted of the characters like the protagonist Binapani, her grandmother Josoda, Jeuti, Bogi and Tagar. Binapani is comparatively vocal about her own emotions and opinions and is a non conformist character. She is trapped in the clutch of patriarchy. Her wills and aspirations are all disregarded by her own family members in an attempt to rectify her ways as a perfect woman in the eyes of the society. But, she never retracted from expressing herself in any condition for which most of her family members criticized her. She of course, had to surrender by marrying a much older man whom she disliked, but she stopped accepting her servitude after her two children were born. She is projected as the subject in her own story that has made the readers to get engaged with the narrative she has provided. The author does so by letting her to speak in her own language, to express her shifting moods, her emotions; thereby erecting a smooth path to enter into the life of a subaltern. Binapani is subaltern due to her gender which she denies to confirm to and comes up with her decision to leave her family and start her life anew. She says: "I have thought about my own self. I have observed so much of women's lives. It is said that women's lives are always submissive to father, husband and their sons..." (*Ayananta* 263).

During her childhood, she always questioned her grandfather about the real cause and essence of the rituals and customs the women had to practice. She sometimes denied to conform to such norms and sometimes argued with the elders. Her humanitarian spirit though was never appreciated by anyone, made her see things differently. She even developed a liking towards a boy from a lower class who became a missionary and roamed around places by spreading knowledge among people. She met her secretly, dreamt of their future but had to refrain. The newer version of her life is worthier as she daringly leaves her servitude to others and wakes up to a new life meant for her own self. She takes up the responsibility of Ruma Baideo's illegitimate child, Tagar and helps her attain what she herself couldn't. Likewise, Bogi, the illegitimate daughter of Haitha Sorai, the richest man in that locality, is



strong enough to face her life. She knows her past and discusses openly about it with Binapani and even expresses her disdain towards everyone who teases her for that cause. She remains the silent volcano who stores the stories of evil tendency and the character of that renowned and honored man, who was her biological father. Jeuti, the woman who was looked down upon by the society for acting in cinema and having a relationship with a lawyer who is a widower and has a son, never wasted her time thinking about the stereotypical society around her and shows the courage to confront the gossips about her among people as she says: “I am not going to ask for the society. I will stay with the lawyer only...” (208). Moreover, Josoda, Binapani’s maternal grandmother, was that kind of a woman who chose to remain silent but, never withdrew her decisions at any cost. She took the charge of adopting the illegitimate child of Ruma Baideo though she was severely criticized by her husband, her sons and daughters-in-law. She announced her decision: “If humans don’t spoil her, this flower is not worm eaten. The God has not created her defective. I will adopt this child. She will live helping you do your works.” (112). She even went to help the freedom fighter’s family who were starving and living a poor, pathetic life; that too against the consent of the other family members.

Binapani too, during her youth, assisted her in this regard. She trembled to see the poor plight of that family and expressed her helplessness as she couldn’t help them uplift their status of life. She often questioned her grandfather why always the good people had to suffer, why there were fixed norms only for the women and so on. Thus, these women have not only uplifted their lives from the position of a subaltern through their words and actions. Here the concept of *relational subjectivation* is relevant. D’ Angello in the above cited essay discusses that *subjectivation* are relational because it requires “sympathetic storytelling” and a “responsible reading” (21). She states that “The process through which the subaltern character becomes a subject requires the intervention of a storyteller and a sympathetic reader” (21). Patangiya Kalita has rightly employed subjectivation in *Ayananta* as she has created the perfect ambience for her female characters to express their lives. The comparatively stronger females doesn’t only speak about themselves but, the readers also get glimpses of the lives of the lesser vocal female characters through their behavioral pattern, their state of being and their reactions towards their own lives. Thus, this novel has rightly given voice to a group of subaltern women in the pre-independence time who suffer due to their gender identity.

A discussion of *Felanee* will also put forward the same notion of subjectivation but, subaltern identities of the women here are far more crucial to explore. The women here are not subaltern only due to their gender, but for their class and group identity. The title of the novel itself is as provocative as it literally means “to throw away”. The novel is a saga of stories of a large group of vulnerable women who solely earn for their families. They are poor but independent. They are some dislocated women during one of the agitations in their land who settle down in a slum area and built up their own territory. Monir Ma, Ratnar Ma, Minoti, Kali Burhi, Jaggu’s wife and so many women with the same destiny has determined to put off the veil of femininity and the coyness; thereby they have fulfilled the first condition



of their being subaltern. Their gender identity no longer promotes them as subalterns. The market place portrayed in the setting of the novel is the liberating and equalizing space for these women. They prepare handmade snacks, handcrafted pieces of furniture, sweets and various other items to sell in the market just like all the male sellers. Still, they are targeted and victimized by the insurgents and also by those people of the higher class and caste co-inhabiting with them in that locality. Some women of this group are from minority group, some are of tribal community and some are altogether without any identity. Their lifestyle and living standard is never up to the mark. They earn in daily basis and have to starve if they don't succeed in selling their products.

Thus, their subalternity now is due to economic cause, due to the unjust societal structures and the conflict amid the haves and the have-nots. Monir Ma or Felanee is confused to have experienced the unexpected turns in her life but, she is not indecisive. She made her mind to bring out her child from the lavatory of camps after they lost their house in the agitation. She is encouraged more by Kali Burhi as we see her saying: "Women must be just like this chilli. It looks small but can burn severely when tasted" (*Felanee*, 61). Kali Burhi, though thin, is a woman of a manly voice and spirit. She is a worshipper of the Hindu Goddess Kali who was courageous enough to compete with men and conquer the evil powers. She foretells about people which earns her the livelihood. Moreover, she inspires and helps other helpless women in her locality by showing them means of earning, giving them solution to their problems and the like. Minati is the mother of a son by one of the agitators who never accepted her socially. He spends nights in her hut to hide from the authority.

Minati never disclosed it to anyone though none remained ignorant of the fact. Ratna's mother, Felanee and all the other women kept the secret because they knew that man and all the other insurgents are so powerful people. They kill people by blasting bombs, rob the houses and shops, and announce *bandh* for days after days if their conditions are not fulfilled. These women and all the other inhabitants of this slum have learnt to adapt to the traumatic times caused by such power mongers. Lives of the other women in the slum are also explained in an intriguing manner with the same intricacy by the author which is an attempt of the author to highlight the plight of those subaltern women. The author has promoted these women as the spokespersons of their lives, for which she has not only let them exercise their liberty within the text but also, narrate their stories altogether in a chorus so as to provide the proper representation of the lives of subaltern women in a small slum area in the Northeast. They have learnt to become independent and cooperative because, they understood that their lives will continue to exist if only they remain united on the face of the frequent agitations and insurgencies. The author's real life experience with these women has made her capable of presenting them in a perfectly authentic manner.

The novelist leaves no aspect of these women's lives unexplored and she does it with utmost concern as if by paraphrasing their words into a fiction. The readers sense the genuine zest of the emotions and feelings of each and every character in these two novels, thereby making them engaged with the stories. No omnipresent authorial control over the storyline can be noticed; rather the readers will witness vibrant landscapes with lively characters



communicating with one another in their usual caricature. Her use of content specific diction, the register used by the two bunches of women belonging to two different classes and societies; employment of regional and cultural details and projection of lively characters contributes to this endeavor. The readers are not only provided with two narratives with women characters as subjects, but in that venture, she has also introduced a lineage of strong women in the remote Northeastern landscape of Assam. Their experience of subalternity is incomparable for their existential identity, their positional discrepancies, the socio-economic unrest in their land and the set of cultural baggage they carry. The women are capable of perceiving and accepting the prevailing political events. They even safeguard so many secrets of such conflicts in them. Here, they are not simply the eyewitness to the events around them but, they are critics of it. Thus, these two novels have brilliantly dealt with subalternity and have given an otherwise estimation of what Spivak stated in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” that the subalterns cannot speak (104).

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