

Unheard Voices of Subalterns in Rajanikanto Bordoloi's *Miri Jiyori***Himangka Patgiri****M. Phil Research Scholar****Assam University, Diphu Campus****Abstract**

Rajanikanto Bordoloi's Assamese novel *Miri Jiyori* sketches two subaltern characters Jonkie and Panei. The true love of these two lovers was disapproved by the society. They had to struggle to get united. Their request went unheard, their protest proved futile, their voices were ignored and they were marginalised by Panei's adamant parents and by the adamant society. They were suppressed by the orthodox and strict society in the name of social norms. Finally, in their efforts to avoid the possible disaster of separation, they were entrapped and enslaved by hill tribesmen and were killed brutally by nailing together. This article attempts to analyze the reasons behind the marginalisation of these two lovers in the '*Miri*' society which did not even listen to their voices. The article also seeks to show how the social condition, social rules of the '*Miris*' of plain and rituals of the '*Gasi Miris*' of hill made the two lovers subalterns directly or indirectly.

Keywords: Subaltern, marginalisation, unheard voice, suppressed, enslaved.

Unheard Voices of Subalterns in Rajanikanto Bordoloi's *Miri Jiyori***Himangka Patgiri****M. Phil Research Scholar****Assam University, Diphu Campus****Introduction:**

Rajanikanta Bordoloi is a famous name in Assamese literature who was a noted novelist and a journalist from Assam, India. He is called as *Upanyash Samrat* (King of Novels) of Assam because of his significant contribution to the formation of the foundation of Assamese novels. Most of his novels are based on the history of Assam. He is even acclaimed as the *Walter Scott of Assam*. His novels include *Miri Jiyori*, *Manomoti*, *Nirmal Bhakat*, *Rahdoi Ligiri*, *Rangilee*, *Donduadrah* etc. Rajanikanta Bordoloi's Assamese novel 'Miri-Jiyori' is a true document of marginalization of common man, lovers and economically weaker section of the society. The novel deals with the circumstances and even the acts of the society which relegate common man to the position of subaltern. Bordoloi's *Miri-Jiyori* discusses this very issue by exemplifying the pathetic story of Jonkie and Panei whose subaltern voices were ignored by the society.

What is 'subaltern'?

Subaltern means inferior in rank and position. The term was derived from the Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci's concept regarding cultural hegemony. Subaltern signifies people of inferior classes who are thought as having no role in the centre of the society and are pushed

to the margins of the society. In general, subaltern refers to a person or a group of lower rank, who are labelled as inferior or of lower rank by those who think themselves as superior. During the colonial days, subalterns were those who were under the hegemony of the ruling classes. Scholars belong to the 'Subaltern Studies Group' are Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ranajit Guha, Edward Said, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Homi K. Bhabha. "By 'subaltern' Spivak meant the oppressed subject, the members of Antonio Gramsci's 'subaltern classes'..... or more generally those of inferior rank" (Gandhi 1). In her *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that subalterns are voiceless. Subalterns cannot raise their voices against the superior class and they cannot protest against the suppression and oppression and the exploitation done to them. And they cannot speak; they only mumble which is unheard, ignored by the class which considers itself as superior to the subalterns. Ania Loomba writes in her *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, "Spivak suggests that it is impossible for us to recover the voice of the subaltern or oppressed colonial subject" (Loomba 194).

Unheard voices of subalterns in the novel:

Bordoloi's *Miri-Jiyori* is a social novel which portrays the Assamese society in general and the Miri(Mishing) society in particular. Published in 1894, the novel deals with the culture, tradition, custom, rituals, ways of worshipping god etc. This novel also reflects the history of Assam and the social condition. The novel sketches two *Miri lovers, Jonkie and Panei, who were suppressed and were dominated by the parents of Panei, the heroine of the novel. They were deprived of their rights by the society. In its effort to separate the two lovers, the society

relegated them to the position of subaltern by ignoring their voices, their request, their protest, and even by suppressing them. The two Miri lovers represent thousands of Miri lovers who were also deprived of their love in the same way. Family's interference in the love affair of two lovers was also prominent in Odisha's Kol society which is nicely described by Lakshminath Bezbaroa in his short story *Ratan Munda*. Even it was not unknown to Assamese society. During the post independence period, a man of high caste could not marry a girl of low caste. Even a girl of *Gosai* family could not marry a British Saheb, a Christian, no matter how deep and true their love was. It is clearly seen in Mamoni Roisom Goswami's *Dotal Hatir Uye Khowa Haoda*. Such intercaste marriage was considered as sin. Thus family and society ignore lovers' wishes by using casteism as weapon. During the last part of the nineteenth century, it was most common that a Miri girl must marry the man whom her parents chose for her. As a result, the lovers had to struggle to get united, but their protest and request went unheard which made them voiceless subalterns.

Panei's parents were adamant. They wanted Panei to marry Komud, a rich man of the village, who paid the bride-price to marry Panei. And Panei's parents started forcing her to marry Komud. Here we see the marginalization of women. The novel shows how adamant parents ignored the wish of their daughter, thereby making her voiceless. A girl's emotions and her love affair were not given any importance. Even Tamed, Panei's father, went to the extent of permitting Komud to make Panei lose her virginity. Tamed's logic is that: if Komud ravishes Panei, she must marry him.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers to the Hindu tradition of *Sati* in which a widow is immolated forcefully on the funeral pyre of her husband. No one tries to listen to her voice. Likewise, in *Miri-Jiyori*, it is seen that daughters were married off to men of their parents' choice in the Miri society of the nineteenth century. And no one even thought of trying to give importance to their request. They were placed on the margin by their parents and the society who located themselves in the centre.

The novel also deals with the marginalization of economically weaker section. Usually, it is seen that poor people are considered as inferior and are made 'others'. Panei's parents did not want her to marry Jonkie because he belonged to the economically weaker class. So, Jonkie was neglected, and was considered as inferior. Panei's father clearly said that he did not want Panei to marry Jonkie because Jonkie was penniless and it is clear from the novel. Jonkie was a subaltern who could not dare to go to Panei's home and talk with her parents regarding the marriage only because he was penniless. Even when Panei was being forced by Tamed to marry Komud, Jonkie could not raise his voice against it. So, he was a voiceless subaltern.

Bride price is a dirty custom according to which the family of the groom has to give money or goods to the bride's family. If the groom or his family is unable to pay the sum of money or the quantity of goods demanded by the bride's family, he has to give up the hope of marrying that particular girl. The bride's family compels the bride to leave her lover. In their attempt to make themselves superior, the groom's family also compels the groom to leave his beloved. As a result, the lovers' love is not valued, they are ignored. They request their families not to follow

the orthodox social custom like bride price and to allow them to marry each other; but their requests go unheard. If the lovers try to elope, they are oppressed and suppressed, dominated and are forcefully separated. Thus family and society marginalize the lovers and push them to the position of subalterns, who are voiceless in Spivak's words. In *Miri Jiyori*, Jonkie could not pay the bride price because of his poverty. So Tamed decided not to allow his daughter to marry Jonkie. On the other hand, rich Komud paid the bride price and won Tamed's mind. In *Miri Jiyori*, the two lovers Jonkie and Panei were made subalterns. Their parents did not try to listen to their voices and were interested only in bride price. The lovers had nothing to do except remaining as voiceless subalterns.

In the later part of the novel, Jonkie and Panei were entrapped and enslaved by the Gasi Miris, the hill tribesmen. They became the slaves of Gasi Miris who used the two slaves in various works. Thus, they were again subjugated. In their attempt to flee from their masters' homes, they were caught red-handed and were charged with theft. They tried their best to make the Gasi Miris realize that they were lovers and had no bad intentions. But the Gasi Miris were adamant who killed the two lovers by nailing together. Their appeal was ignored, their request went unheard.

Conclusion:

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says that subalterns are voiceless, they can neither speak nor raise their voice, and they only mumble which is unheard. It is clear from *Miri-Jiyori* in which

Jonkie and Panei were dominated, marginalized and made voiceless. Although they tried to raise their voice, their voice was unheard and was given no importance by Panei's parents, by the Miri society and by the Gasi Miris and this revitalizes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's point: "subaltern cannot speak."

**Miri*- Miri is the former name of the 'Mishing' community. In this article, 'Miri' is used because it is found in the novel *Miri jiyori*.

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