

Women's body and sexuality: articulating repression and resistance in the select narratives of Indira Goswami and Buchi Emecheta

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Abstract

Body is the chief site to entrap women's freedom in their own self; since body and sexuality are inseparable, sexuality becomes one of the prominent aspects of women's subordination to a mere commodity. Power relations construct the social structure of a society; repression and resistance are two prominent effects of power which simultaneously function in the social structure creating a social hierarchy for individuals. This paper intends to explore how individual voices are constantly silenced and voiced in their everyday life in the Assamese and the Igbo society; for the analysis of these two societies, the paper has restricted the analysis only to the *sattrra* culture of Assam and the Igbo tradition of the Ibuza town of Nigeria as delineated by Goswami and Emecheta. Since both authors, Emecheta and Goswami are often reckoned as women novelists—feminist and social activist respectively—the focus have largely been drawn on women's issues; however, it hardly overlooked men characters. Focusing on different socio-cultural aspects of these two societies – the *sattrra* culture and the traditional Ibuza town – the paper is an endeavour to explore each writer's two narratives – *Blue Necked God*, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (Goswami), *The Bride Price*, and *The Joys of Motherhood* (Emecheta) and the article uses abbreviations for each of these narratives as *God*, *Tusker*, *Bride*, and *Joys* respectively. The analysis and interpretation of their narratives draw insights and precisions from such prominent thinkers as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and James Scott. The interpretation is largely interwoven with the help of post-feminist ideas—sexuality and individuality rather than men-women discrimination—that have shaped the interpretation of these narratives. This paper attempts to establish the argument that repression of women goes beyond the arena of body domination at the hands of men, cultural subordination of women is a mutual interaction between individuals rather than men's deliberate effort to target women, how women are trapped to exercise their own subordination through everyday conditioning in their life, and how they emerge out of their subordination through their everyday resistance.

Keywords: repression, resistance, sexuality, everyday practices, power, women.

Introduction

The Igbo society and the Assamese *sattrra*¹ culture altogether represent two different strata of the Nigerian and Indian societies respectively; Emecheta's narratives are imbued with the traditional Igbo social milieu while Goswami's narratives delineate a graphic panorama of the Assamese *sattrra* culture. Emecheta's narratives, *The Bride Price* (1976) and *The Joy of Motherhood* (1979)

explore existing financial exchange of girls as bride and notion of motherhood v/s womanhood respectively; the former presents how women are means of transactional artifact in the Igbo society while the latter speculates on motherhood that becomes constraining and subordinating their existence to reproduction. Goswami's *The Blue-necked God* (1976 [trans. 2013]) exposes the brutal reality of the widows residing in the city of Brindavan; the *sattra* culture is exemplified in the narrative, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (2004 [trans. 2005]). Majority of the southeast Nigeria is inhabited by the Igbo people and their traditional cultureⁱⁱ; the Igbo social structure is believed to be patriarchal in its socio-cultural hierarchy. Women are supposed to have subordinate position in society on the basis of the vulnerability of their bodies and it is the men who create their world by monopolizing various customs and cultural practices of their village, Ibuza; women also control a large part of Igboland due to their contribution to local market through various club groups and age associationsⁱⁱⁱ. Nevertheless, it hardly improvises their condition and relegated position under certain socio-cultural practices and customs; Aku-nna and Nnu-Ego exemplify such cultural subordination in their daily lives. Goswami's women characters are independent and take steps to have their ways in the *sattra* society; yet their subordination under religio-cultural customs and traditions. Their subordination and individual repression and resistance are analyzed on the basis of manipulation of their sexuality and everyday practices.

Contextualizing everyday repression and subordination

Repression is often understood in terms of power relation that functions through individual interaction; therefore, contextualizing repression in power discourses brings out a comprehensive understanding of repression in individuals daily life. To a broader understanding, power is taken as individual actions; it "acts upon actions: an action upon action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future" (Foucault 1982, 789). Power, therefore, is considered a "practice" (de Cherteau 1984), "habitus" (Bourdieu 1991), and "discipline" (Foucault 1995); repression is, according to Foucault, linked to repression of sexuality and "all the agencies of control and all the mechanisms of surveillance" (1978, 41) are grounded in creation of accepted sexuality and its prohibitions. Habitus, enunciates Bourdieu, is a strategic power through actions; "behaviour is strategic rather than rule or norm conforming" (Shwartz 1997, 99). Habitus constitutes internalization of norms on the basis of individuals' daily behaviour; it determines a wide range of dispositions to shape individuals and thus there is a "set of dispositions that are formed, stored, recorded and exert influence to mould forms of human behaviour" (Navarro 2006, 16). Foucault's disciplinary power and Bourdieu's *habitus* help to speculate over individual subordination in their daily life experiences.

Emecheta as a feminist has enlightened her readers of crucial women issues that are constituted in their daily life; while focusing on widows at large, Goswami's narratives endeavour to manifest women predicament in the *sattra* culture. Both writers present how women's sexuality is channelized to subordinate their position as an individual in the patriarchal society. In the Igbo society, women often get married early in their prime time; women's subordination has resulted as a consequence of prevalent cultural practices such as bride price, polygamy, inheritance, and their customary subordination. Aku-nna has developed a great love for "her father, and he responded as much as their custom allowed – she was not only a girl?"

(Bride 17). Her father has always loved her more than any of his children even his son Nnando; he induces the thought that she is the property of her father

He had named her Aku-nna, meaning literally “father’s wealth”, knowing that the only consolation he could count from her would be her bride price. To him this was something to look forward to. (Bride 10)

Her internalization of her identity as an appendage to her father objectifies her as a thing who will bring him all the fruits he has desired for; she is determined “to marry well, a rich man of whom her father would approve and who would be able to afford her expensive bride price” (Bride 10). Her duty to her family is clear and she is determined to shoulder her responsibility as a daughter to present herself as a transactional aid to her family. At first, a woman is her father’s property and she is soon to be transferred to another owner as brother or husband in her latter life; a “girl belonged to you today as your daughter, and tomorrow, before your very eyes, would go to another man in marriage” (Bride 17). Custom of bride price is first aspect of woman’s subordination in the Igbo society which reduces her body to an object to be sold for the sake of her own family; polygamy is the most brutal custom that reduces them only to an object of sexuality and reproduction and the Igbo society has its own justification to follow it. After the demise of Aku-nna’s father, her mother Ma Blackie is inherited by his elder brother, Okonkwo; Oguagua enlightens her of the Ibuza custom saying, ““your mother is inherited by my father, you see, just as he will inherit everything your father worked for”” (Bride 64). *The Joys of Motherhood* focuses on its central issue of motherhood and womanhood but it does not fail to throw light over polygamy which is induced in women as an acceptable behaviour of their Igbo husbands; Nwokocho Agbadi, Nnu-Ego’s father, has seven wives in his hometown Ogboli

Two of Agbadi’s wives came from Ibuza, two from his own village of Ogboli, three were slaves he had captured during his wanderings; and he also had two mistresses. (Joys 11)

The Igbo society accepts polygamy because through this a man shows his wealth; therefore, chieftanship^{iv} and polygamy are two prominent aspects of showing a man’s wealth. Polygamy, observes Basden, is “an indication of social standing and, to some extent signs of affluence; in any case they are counted as sound investments” (1921, 97). The habitual internalization establishes such customs as bride price and polygamy in their society; it is through their “early socialization experiences in which external structures are internalized” (Shwartz, 103). Their internalization is result of their social interaction; Nnu-Ego’s internalization of polygamy is result of her interaction and relation with her father Agabadi who has seven wives in line to show his wealth. Later, her husband takes another wife in her inability to reproduce; motherhood, therefore, is not only meant for womanhood but also manhood, her husband Amatokwu says, ““I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile”” (Joys 32). A woman’s body becomes ‘docile’^v under the disciplinary practices that function in the guise of various customs and rituals allotted for individuals; these practices consequently are internalized in their habitual behaviour resulting in their subordination.

Goswami, however, presents a panorama of the *sattr*a culture constructed under religious scriptures; social structure of the *sattr*a is built through power of scriptures exercised by the priests and their followers. Saru Gossainee, Giribala, and Durga are widows of the Amarnaga *sattr*a; their subordination to cultural and scriptural power is illustrated through their widowhood. Their increasing miserable condition shows their everyday struggle to meet their ends; Giribala is boycott from the society after the death of her husband

Once long back, from such a trailing crowd, a voice had cried out, “Don’t touch her! Don’t touch her! You women with *sindoor*. She’s a widow now.” . . . Giribala jumped out from the cart and went towards the right-hand side of the verandah. . . weeping quietly. (Tusker 27)

Besides their social exclusion, their subordination is customized in their daily life experiences; they are not allowed to eat fried and cooked food. In the similar grain, widows residing in Vrindavan are called *radheshyamis* and their life is narrowed and limited only to the small dark rooms of the city of Brajdharm; behind the Radha Damodar Temple “were numerous small and dark rooms”, looking like “pigeon-holes”, and the place was inhabited with “a crowd of emaciated and gaunt old widows who made their living as *radheshyamis*” (God 36).

Foremost subordination of widows takes place through social boycott in the most auspicious occasions; however, along with their social ostracization, sexual repression is interwoven in their daily life. Saudamini is not allowed to have a relationship with a Christian youth in her family; therefore the Roy Choudhary family brings their daughter to Braj to show her the “small room towards the back of the building” (God 13) to which her life is meant to be limited by her only. Internalization of widows-subordination is cultural and its basis is found in religious scriptures propagated by the priests who are males, indeed. Renunciation to sexuality is the greatest humiliation to young widows’ bodies; but it does not protect them from being brutally scrutinized under the evil eyes. “Like butchers examining animals before buying them, the young men would strip off their clothes in order to examine their bodies thoroughly and make sure that they are without any blemishes” (God 8). Their sexuality is not to be voiced by themselves but it becomes a property at the hands of the priests who would, in the name of being provider, allow them to stay in their house to contribute in their daily works and consequently being partners in many other aspects

Many priests had kept destitute widows in their rooms before this. Both parties benefitted by this arrangement. The poor women were assured that there would be someone to see to their needs when they died and the priests had their work done and their housekeeping, *whatever there was of it*, taken care of. (God 37)

Widows are forced to lead a life of destitute and the priests are the first to take advantage of it; Alamgarhi would live with a young widow named Shashiprova. Saru Gossainee is assisted by Mahidhar Bapu at her home; however, she remains careful regarding her reputation and hardly stains her respectful status – “Wickedness had never tainted her thoughts or her actions. Even when Mahidhar was not present in the house, she had never touched his cot or sat on it. She

had tightly bound her daily routine and she had never tried to break this chain” (*Tusker* 186). The widows restrain their bodily needs and desires; they never respond to its calls and urges. Durga, Indranath’s aunt, becomes a stern adherer to widowhood because in her opinion a widow’s respect depends on her strict adherence to widowhood rituals exemplified in Saru Gossainee; she adores Saru for it saying, “Saru Gossainee gets things done through her disciples. She has never set foot on the land herself. That is why she is respected so much by everybody!” (*Tusker* 9).

Emecheta’s narratives throw light over brutal practices that target women’s bodies as object of men’s observation for their forbearance and tolerance; *The Bride Price* exposes women’s body as an object of men’s scrutiny through their open exposure before their wedding. Before wedding the Igbo women are not supposed to cover their upper bodies; “their custom allowed this. Boys would come into your mother’s hut and play at squeezing a girl’s breast until they hurt; the girl was supposed to try as much as possible to ward them off and not be bad tempered about it” (*Bride* 97). These brutal customs take place in the presence of elders and sometimes their elder women, mother or aunts; women become equal partners in their own domination and justifying it through the exercise of those practices in their daily life. Aku-nna’s mother hardly interrupts the situation until her daughter gives a painful voice due to Okoboshi’s advancement to her which her custom allowed in the traditional Igbo customs of the Ibuza town.

Repression of women is internalized through social interaction between individuals in their daily life experiences; their daily behaviour and practices are normalized creating stabilized norms and practices which are further continued through generations. Widows self repression is the exercise of disciplinary practices to restrain their bodily needs in order to present a perfect model of widows to be followed through generations; widows deviation from allotted rituals is a punishable offence through various *prayashchit* and thus “each subject finds himself caught in a punishable, punishing universality” (Foucault 1995, 178). Giribala is cruelly beaten by her mother, the Gossainee for eating “mutton cooked with black beans” (*Tusker* 144); after physical mutilation she has to go through religious atonement to purify her from the committed sin, “purification and ritualistic atonement” and “moral lectures” (*Tusker* 147) act as moral punishment to the widows who scarcely find way to escape it. The social order creates and structures different arenas of social life for individuals; women’s status in these ‘fields’ (Bourdieu 1984) is often placed as subordinate to men’s position in social hierarchy. Bourdieun capital is divided into four forms—economic, social, cultural, symbolic—which allocate individuals according to their possession of these capitals (McCall 1992, 840). Gender, therefore, becomes prominent aspect for women’s subordination in social order in particular field; symbolic forms – education, art, religion – often attempt to repress women by exercising them to achieve their specified symbolic interests (845). Women are linked with cultural capital through their femininity and their move towards symbolic capital leads to violation of accepted norms and opening door to their domination. Aku-nna’s priority of education and Nnu-Ego’s local trade come in conflict with male power—Okonkwo, her step-father and Nnaife her husband respectively—which consequently result in their domination at the hands of men creating patriarchy; however, their priorities begin to threaten male power resulting in their subordination and soon it is internalized as exertion of male power to re-establish their power through relegating women, as it is seen in the Igbo society. The *sattrra* culture on the other hand shows

maintenance of particular class domination – landowner and priests – so that they could take their power to the higher authority.

Contextualizing women’s sexuality through their select narratives

The identity of a woman is situated and fixed only within the periphery of her body; it is the body that is taken as a site to control her ‘self’, her freedom, and most importantly her right over her own body. Exploring miserable condition of widows in the Amranga *sattr*a and in the city of Braj, Goswami reflects upon how women’s body is controlled by prevalent practices and rituals related to widowhood; the unmarried women’s body is also the locus to practice patriarchy by the male authority. The ‘menarche’ not only begins women’s sexuality but it also provides an opportunity to control their being only as a body. Through her female characters, the author shows the patriarchal nature of ‘menarche’; it is “a ‘significant’ developmental event – with no male equivalent – signaling ‘womanhood’ and ‘femininity’” (Lovering 1996, 14). Elliman and Giribala are supposed to get married before having their first menstruation because it is the process that makes a woman aware of her own body and exposes its complicacies; the fear of having gossips of her daughter’s “first signs of menstruation” (*Tusker* 33) around the *sattr*a forces her mother, the Gossainee to get her daughter, Giribala married to the man she never wanted to. Therefore, they are soon to be handed over to a man who will control her body sexually without leaving any opportunity to explore it by themselves and knowing themselves. Widows are supposed to lead a life of renunciation without giving voice to their sexuality; Giribala (*The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*) and Saudamini (*The Blue-necked God*) are not allowed to have affair with Mark Sahib and Christian lover respectively. Emecheta also shows women’s subjugation by utilizing and manipulating women’s sexuality; Aku-nna is supposed to get married soon after attaining her first menstruation, “she had been told about it often by her mother and she knew the responsibility that went with its” (*Bride* 92). It has turned her into a “fully grown” woman who is to be married off by her mother and by the man of her people’s choice and any deviation from it is not acceptable. The Igbo patriarchy functions under the garb of her parents; she thinks, “*How simple our lives would have been but for the interference of our parents*, she mused” (139).

Emecheta’s narratives are structured to contour prominent practices – bride price, slavery, polygamy – that primarily target women’s body; her female characters “have highlighted the ambiguities and the shifting nature of the concept of gender in many African societies” (Hackett 2000, 239). Goswami showcases scriptural and religious practices that constraint women’s body and its needs; Saudamini’s mother, Anupama expects her daughter to do religious *parikrama* of the god because it could distract her from her bodily and desires and needs, the narrator says, “Anupama could hardly bear to think of the ‘inner mind’, or ‘the soul’s door’, of a girl of such tender age...[she] also thought about the long and difficult route of the *parikrama*, a route of more than sixteen hundred dusty and difficult miles!” (*God* 49). Young widows are subjected to various forms of sexual and bodily exploitation because without their male-counterpart young widows are considered more vulnerable to such exploitation; the narrator broods over an incident – “Like butchers examining animals before buying them, the young men would make these young widows strip off their clothes in order to examine their bodies thoroughly and make sure that they were without any blemishes” (*God* 8). Their bodies

are scrutinized to ensure the delicacy of their bodies; moreover, majority of the young widows are forced to find a 'safe' and suitable accommodation with priest to evade from the piercing eyes of the swindlers and vagabonds – “Many priests had kept destitute widows in their rooms...both parties benefitted by this arrangement. The poor women were assured that there would be someone to see to their needs when they died and the priests had their work done and their housekeeping” (*God* 37). Starving widows in the pious city of Brajdhham had only one wish in this world – survival and their ‘moderate’ burial after their death; their hunger actually is not only embodied to their physical appetite but it also refers to their sexual hunger as well by which their body was deprived of. Their miserable condition is paralleled to that of prostitutes; the young widows are treated as pious prostitutes similar to devadasis who were only to serve the priests of the temples in Brindavan. Both writers throw light over female sexuality that is used by the male authority – patriarchy in the Igbo society and scriptures or religion in the Assamese *sattra* – to construct female subjectivity in their daily life experiences; “female subjectivity is normalized and subordinated by the everyday bodily requirements and vulnerabilities of ‘femininity’” (Bordo 1993, 186). Women’s body is therefore the locus, the instrument, or the site of ‘social control’; their femininity is the chief aspect of female subordination that constructs female subjectivity under the periphery of patriarchal world and the target is always female sexuality either by promoting heterosexuality or conventionality of their bodies.

Reclaiming women’s sexuality through resistance

Resistance is a tactful exercise of counter-power to oppose the existing power rather than challenging it through an alternative; it is considered various modes of individual appropriation to accommodate with prevalent power-structure. Foucauldian power-relation explores the idea that “where there is power there is resistance” (Foucault 1978); resistance, therefore, is an effect power which productive and yet allusive. Resistance is, indeed, an exercise of power in Foucault’s notion of power; however, de Certeau’s theory of practice determines resistance as a ‘tactic’ or tactics which “capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances” (1984, xix). Nevertheless, James Scott’s notion of “everyday resistance” (1989, 33, 36, 37, 40) has brought an innovative aspect to resistance studies; however, his analysis is based on peasant studies; it has provided an ample scope to implement it in their day to day life. He has employed the term ‘hidden transcript’ to execute individual actions that take place “offstage”, beyond direct observation by powerholders (1990, 4). Everyday forms of resistance, direct opposition by disguised resisters, hidden transcripts, and discourse of dignity constitute prominent forms of resistance under which my interpretation and analysis is based; de Certeau’s ‘tactic’ practices and Foucauldian resistance within power structure have helped the analysis move a step further in post-structuralist approach.

Aku-nna realizes her inability to adjust in the traditional Ibuza town; she is constantly disturbed by her mother’s acceptance to her inheritance as a second wife to her uncle, Okonkwo. Prioritizing her sexuality, she is determined not to marry man of her family’s choice and proceeds to develop her relation with Chike, her teacher and an *osu-slave*^{vi}. Her resistance to adherence to the Ibuza traditions and customs is exemplified in her resistance to marry a free-born^{vii} as she is; by marrying Chike she intends to prioritize her body, to oppose her traditional family and her imposed identity as a free-born of the Ibuza town. She says that she is marrying

him for many reasons exploring them as “— your kindness, your understanding and respect for people, and the fact that you are suffering too, I mean your whole family. Oh, I don’t know — I want to marry you for many, many reasons which I feel in my heart, although I can’t name them all” (*Bride* 149). Her inter-caste marriage manifests her resistance to her identity, her family, and most significantly to voice her sexuality; however, her marriage is a challenge to existing Igbo structure and try to exercise her own power. She wishes to marry the man who she feels for sexually and Chike is the man she marries by accepting her sexuality. Her resistance is a sort of adjustment in the prevalent power structure; she does not replace it with the new one because she follows the Igbo custom of bride price that her husband, Chike decides to pay her father, Oknokwo who refuses to take it. Aku-nna’s abduction tries to chain her sexuality to man who is not physically efficient to take on her sexually; her resistance reveals her efforts to resist physical domination and mental humiliation at the hands of Okoboshi. Linguistic form of resistance is exemplified in her bold speech and utilization of social chastity for women to protect her from his cruel advancement; she says, “Do you want me to tell you when it started? I’ll tell you. That afternoon at school, that day when you and your friends made me cry. Yes that was the day. . . . Yes, have you heard our results? I passed. And you failed,” she taunted” (*Bride* 138). Her speech is enough to shatter his male-ego and to bring him to his own humiliation at the hands of a frail woman; moreover, it worked as mental humiliation to his self and his very being as a man.

Nnu-Ego’s resistance is seen in her refusal to be a house-wife at her husband, Nnaife’s home in Lagos; she establishes herself as a self-independent woman by running a small trade: “She learned early in their married life to economise, since Nnaife earned little” (*Joys* 48). Her resistance is in part targeted against her subordination to commodity at her home that she attempts to resist through her local trade. On the other hand, Adaku resists her domination being an inherited wife at Nnaife’s house; she does not get any financial support at his house and she decides to end her domination by accepting a life of prostitute, “I’m leaving here tomorrow with my girls. I am not going to Ibuza. I am going to live with those women in Montgomery Road. Yes, I am going to join them, to make some of our men who return from the fighting happy” (*Joys* 168). Her decision to prostitution suggests her resistance to her humiliation due to brutal system of polygamy; prostitution is not only a solution to her polygamy but also a financial security to her own. Nnu-Ego resists to being an independent woman with local trade and discarding her womanhood; her adherence to her motherhood exemplifies her resistance to discard the traditional Ibuza custom of adoration to motherhood. However, it is important to note that, Nnu-Ego is not able to voice her sexuality in spite of knowing the reality that womanhood and motherhood are male-creation that chains her identity; she says, “I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood. Is such an enviable position? The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. . . . We women ascribe to that law more than anyone” (*Joys* 187).

Widows’ resistance to renunciation is exemplified in the characters of Giribala, Saru, and Saudamini; women’s bodies are subject to ‘social conditioning’ and ‘normalisation’ that can be “arranged, re-arranged, constructed and deconstructed as we choose” (Bordo 195, 196). Saudamini’s relation with Christian youth is her resistance to widowhood rituals that require renunciation of body; her affair also shows her resistance to self-restraint to her bodily needs that she voices through her relationship. She also explores her body through her wandering with Charanbehari; she asks him, “Why do you not feel any desire for me? People say that I have not

yet become like those old dried up women....Tell me don't you feel any...." (God 78). She decides to comprehend her body and its sexual urges that stand as hindrance to her husband, Subroto's memory deeply attached to her. Indeed, it is her husband's memory that debars her to respond to her bodily urges; her bodily exploration is a stern opposition to his memories standing on her way to accomplish it. Giribala is not ready to spend her entire life on boiled food and attempts to break rituals set for widows; "she forgot everything...religion and rituals, wisdom or restraint...she started gulping it down in great haste..." (Tusker 144). Saru also does not establish any physical contact with Mahidhar Babu but she watches him fearlessly and without any shame; a "ripple of excitement would pass through her body whenever he came near her" (Tusker 77). Withdrawing her restraint, one day she "glanced again at Mahidhar's body. The colour of his skin now resembled the dazzling brown colour of the mud on the bank of the Jagalia river. She suddenly longed to touch him..." (Tusker 105). Moreover, she does not restrain her bodily urges while having a glance of Vishnu Ojha; "she had watched Vishnu Ojha, her eyes fixed on him, bewitched by the graceful, sensuous movements of his arms and body" (Tusker 216). Her resistance to restraining her sexuality shows her opposition to widowhood but it also suggests her accommodation to that very existing power structure; her watching and resistance to physical advancement suggest that accommodation and her voice because "smelling food was almost as good as eating it" (Tusker 141).

Both writers have tried to show how women resist prevalent norms and customs; Emecheta explores customary and disciplinary subordination while Goswami throws light over cultural oppression. Resistance of women characters articulates their voices in different ways at different circumstances; their everyday resistance is exemplified in their endeavours to voice their sexuality and individuality through self-practices. Nevertheless, Goswami has also brought other aspect into consideration that subverts women's voices; suicides at the hands of women subvert their voices in blunt attack on the social evils targeted to their subordination. Giribala and Saudamini commit suicide to end their oppression in the society where rituals are instrumental in their domination. Giribala decides to end her life to evade the ritual oppression of widowhood and its renunciation – rituals, *prayashchit*^{viii}, moral lessons, and purification that target her body to its humiliation. When she is caught with Mark Sahib by her people, she is asked by the priests to purify her body before entering her home because she is the daughter of the Gossain, the present *adhikar*^{ix}; to her, atonement is a torment and she says, "Start the fire I will come out" (Tusker 301), however, the reality is that "without a word, quietly, she went inside, as if she had been waiting for the permission" (Tusker 300). Saudamini is unable to comprehend her bodily needs and ends her life in the midst of stormy waves in order to get rid of her own body which constantly demanded a union with male body. After her death her white chaddar emerges out of the river as coloured with married woman's cloth; stained chaddar gets entangled with a married woman's shawl which leads to many scandals at the hands of inquisitive visitors. Suicides, therefore, in women's issues represent individuals' capacity for resistance and provides with a path "to escape from state of oppression" (McNay 1992, 173). The truth is that by ending her life, Giribala and Saudamini are able to evade the confrontation to their oppression but they could not resist the scandals that continued after their deaths; therefore, their suicides subvert their voices in present social structure that hardly allows any changes in their submissive voices.

Conclusion

Repression is the exercise of power through which individuals hold control over other individuals and which allow the powerholders become powerful by making others powerless. Maintenance of control becomes the fundamental issue of powerholders that establish their permanent control in social order; however, that maintenance keeps on shifting because of shifting nature of power from repressor to resisters. Women's voices are articulated through their resistance which brings their voices through inversion and subversion of their voices in that social order. The Igbo society is bold enough to provide their women voices through their local trades and different social organizations such as women's associations and secret societies yet their domination under the umbrella of traditional Igbo customs and cultural rituals remain on the floor. In the similar way, socio-cultural subordination of women in the *sattrra* culture of Indian society reveals that the realization of their repression will have their voices from the bottom. Goswami uncovers the truth that "rules and customs laid down a thousand years ago by such personalities like Manu, Parasar, Brihaspati and others have now becomes covered with the dust of time....[b]ut the truth has remained the same, and neither Rik, nor Manu, nor Parasar nor anyone else, has been able to influence or change the Truth" (*God* 122). Both the writers, therefore, through their narratives reflect on how women can challenge their subordination in prevalent socio-cultural domination; their narratives, therefore, present that their resistance is the best way to articulate their voices. However, both writers' narratives end in defeat; Goswami's female protagonists commit suicide while *Aku-nna* dies after first child-birth which reinforces the superstition of the paid bride price and *Nnu-Ego* dies alone – after reaching the old age and giving birth to nine children – and none of her family members are there to see her last time. *Nnu-Ego* remains chained within her motherhood and dies with that chain without regretting on her fate that she consciously accepted as her own creation. Their bodies remain chained even after their subsequent deaths; the writers through their female protagonists interrogate the possibility of independence of women's body and they question is really there any way unchain their very being and their true 'self'? This question remains unanswered and complicated which attempt to shackle women even in the contemporary and free world where an 'illusionary' equality pervades. Nevertheless, women succeed in exercising their will to attain her desired goals through everyday resistance that helps them understand their body and create a new identity out of it through "self" practices.

Notes

ⁱ *Sattrra* and *namghar* are two prominent institutions that propagated Vaishnavism in Assam. It is a "Vaisnavite monastery founded by Vaisnava saints of Assam" (*Tusker* 348). In Assam, there are many local *sattrras* that control major activities of the Assamese society (S. Sharma 2001, 265)

ⁱⁱ The Igbo people cover majority of the southeast Nigeria and they are united by Igbo language, customs, and life style.

ⁱⁱⁱ Age-grade associations are composed of age-companies, formed among boys from the ages of thirteen and fifteen years (Ohadike 1996, xxv).

^{iv} In the Igbo society, a man's status is reckoned on the basis of titles that he owes, for instance, *Obi*, *Eze*, *Nwe*, etc.

^v Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, has enunciated the notion of 'docile bodies' that result from the disciplinary practices.

- ^{vi} The *osu*-slaves are cult-slaves, often considered outcastes in the Igbo society; they are not acceptable in their social structure.
- ^{vii} The Igbo people consider themselves free-people different from the slave castes.
- ^{viii} Religious atonement – required to be practiced as punishment to their sins.
- ^{ix} The formal head of the *sattr*.

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