Theorizing the ‘Woman’s Text’

The previous chapter tried to establish the base for a feminine nationalist discourse taking shape through the ‘woman’s text’. As women began to communicate with each other through their writings (in this case articles and speeches), a discourse of their own developed which may not have challenged the existing male discourse but definitely allowed them to participate in an otherwise restricted space. Ideals of womanhood, the purpose of a woman’s life, woman’s role in the creation of an ‘ideal home’ (regarded as a sacred space in the emerging nationalist discourse) were topics on which women chose to write and express their opinion. This chapter seeks to explore the ‘woman’s text’ as a challenge to the masculinist nature of colonialism and anti-colonial struggles which sought to restrict the participation of women. The chapter addresses the issue of a female literary sub culture in the Indian context before moving on to the scene in Assam. At the same time it provides a discursive ground for the ‘woman’s text’ attempting to include observations on how Assamese women respond to concepts such as ‘domesticity’, ‘race’, ‘community’, ‘gender’, and their own positioning in this regard. Such writings and speeches have rendered visible the otherwise invisible daily lives, physical experiences, personal conflicts, and strategies of survival of women both in the domestic space and outside it.
I

Women’s writings as critics like Mary Anne Ferguson have said “would reflect women’s real worlds and their real experiences”. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* comments on the need for money and a room of her own if a woman was to write; her emphasis being on women writing fiction (Woolf 1998: 13).

...give her a room of her own and five hundred a year, let her speak her mind and leave out half that she now puts in, and she will write a better book one of these days (Woolf 1998: 99).

As she opened her famous speech, Woolf said, "All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point - a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." (Woolf 1998: 13) As it turns out, this thesis of *A Room Of One's Own* is no small point but indeed a highly influential subversion that is still significant generations later. In her research for this speech, she finds that "there was an enormous body of masculine opinion to the effect that nothing could be expected of women intellectually" (Woolf 1998: 54). She knows though that this is not due to a male desire for women to be inferior; they are only worried that they, the men, get to be superior. It was detrimental for women’s writing to have no precedent since they would be marred by a masculine style. She believed that “it was the sentence which was unsuited for a woman’s use” (Woolf 1998: 82) She posited that women must find their own forms to write. Ancient literary forms, such as the epic poem, would not be logical for women to work with, because their
size and shape had been normatively settled by masculine influences - which differed from feminine sensibilities.

The eighteenth century writer, philosopher, and advocate of women’s right, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) in her work *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman* (1792) responded to the educational and political theorists of the eighteenth century who believed that by means of education alone women could attain freedom of the mind and soul. Her argument was that women are not naturally inferior to men intellectually (as has always been claimed by the androcentric society), and with education, they will be as rational as men. Enlightenment thinkers also believed that the various intellectual disciplines, such as science and philosophy, were meant only for men. The primary role of women for political thinkers beginning with Plutarch, was that of a mother who reared her sons to be sacrificed on the altar of civic necessity. For Rousseau mother and mother’s milk serve as foundations for civic spiritedness and willingness to die. He starts his masterpiece on the “art of education,” *Émile, or On Education* (1762), with a tribute to breast milk and maternity. He explains the profound impact of breastfeeding on infants, affirming that it intensifies the mother-child bond, and therefore the overall harmony of the family, which he views as a fundamental unit of civilization. Rousseau perceives mother’s milk as having a revolutionary capacity to stimulate a “natural feeling” of compassion and affirms in his work *Emile*: “When mothers deign to nurse their own children, then will be a reform in morals; natural feeling will revive in every heart; there will be no lack of citizens
for the state; this first step by itself will restore mutual affection,” in his work *Emile* (Rousseau).

Mary Astell’s tract on women’s education entitled “A Serious Proposal to the Ladies” forwards a vision of female academies that would provide “ladies of quality” with an alternative to participation in the marriage market. She writes:

> For since God has given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them? Since he has not denied us the faculty of Thinking, why should we not (at least in gratitude to him) employ our Thoughts on himself their noblest Object, and not unworthily bestow them on Trifles and Gaities and secular Affairs? Being the Soul was created for the Contemplation of Truth as well as for the fruition of Good, is it not as cruel and unjust to exclude Women from the knowledge of the one as from the enjoyment of the other….And indeed as unnecessary as it is thought for Women to have Knowledge, she who is truly good finds very great use of it, not only in the Conduct of her own Soul but in the management of her Family, in the Conversation of her Neighbours and in all the concerns of Life. (in Poston 1988: 199, 201)

Regarding the education of children, women play the most important role according to Astell. The mother is the one who has to lay the foundation of it as she has more opportunities of ‘observing a child’s temper’ than a father who is engaged in other ‘laborious work’ (in Poston 1988: 201).

The field of feminist literary histories began from the late 1970’s with the appearance of at least three works of considerable importance. Each of them sought to set up women’s writing as a new disciplinary field. Beginning with Ellen
Moer’s *Literary Women: The Great Writers*, Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of their Own: British Women Writers from Bronte to Lessing* followed by Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, these books signaled feminist criticism’s turn from the representation of women in literature by men to ‘gynocritics’ which focused on literature by women (Showalter 2009). Showalter’s work concerns fiction and in it she tries to trace the “female literary tradition” in English fiction from about the 1840’s. She observed that there existed three major phases that she claimed were common to all literary subcultures. First, a phase of imitation; second, one of protest; and third, “a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward, freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity.” Gilbert and Gubar were the first to unite the angel and the mad woman in a single being, applaud expressive transgressions, and identify her with the woman writer. *The Mad Woman in the Attic* an analysis of the major Anglo-American women writers of the nineteenth century tries to explore anew a “distinctively female literary tradition” and develop a theory of “female literary response to male literary assertion and coercion” (Gilbert and Gubar 2007: vii). The writers set out to analyze the double burden faced by women writers. Against the myths of creativity, women writers have to work past the ideal of the ‘eternal feminine’ that was set up as inspiration and complement to the male – a combination of angelic beauty and sweetness, passive, docile selfless (Gilbert and Gubar 2007: 23). Gilbert and Gubar’s book represented women writers as historical beings engaged in a search for identity, equality, and authority that mirrored, and was intended to mirror, that of many women, not just writers (Gezari 2006: 266). It had by then become imperative to focus on a female paradigm in order to reject and avoid a
dominant male paradigm. Gilbert and Gubar’s account of the nineteenth century
woman writer begins with a question, which immediately positions woman’s
relation to the act of writing. If a pen is “a metaphorical penis,” a woman has no
right to it; if creative imagination is a “male quality”, a woman cannot possess it
(Gilbert and Gubar 2007: 3). To quote their example from Jane Austen’s
*Persuasion* where Anne Elliot remarks “men have had every advantage of us in
telling their story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen
has been in their hands” (Austen 1993: 223). The pen has been in male hands in
such a way that any woman who attempts to use the pen commits dissent.
Literature abounds in examples where writing, reading, and even thinking have
been regarded as ‘alien’ to women. Instead, women were offered training in
various skills that contribute to the moral development and the “display” quality of
a wife: music, drawing, singing, painting, and so on. Rousseau in *Emile* advocates
very specific gender roles. Sophie is educated in such a manner that she will fill
what Rousseau takes to be her natural role as a wife: the focus is not on academic
matters as men’s minds are more suited to that type of thinking than women’s
minds.

Gilbert and Gubar deny the relevance of the “anxiety of influence” that a
male poet experiences according to the Bloomian model. Instead, the female poet
may become a victim of “the ‘anxiety of authorship’ - a radical fear that she cannot
create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will
isolate or destroy her” (Gilbert and Gubar 2007: 49). The woman writer therefore
has no tradition to fall back upon which defines her identity as a writer. Therefore,
unlike her male counterpart, the female writer has to fight against and resist an established patriarchal literary authority. Gilbert and Gubar further write:

Thus the loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers, her culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization, her dread of the patriarchal authority of art, her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention – all these phenomena of “inferiorization” mark the woman writer’s struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self creation from those of her male counterpart (Gilbert and Gubar 2007: 50).

In fact, a female literary subculture can be identified which Elaine Showalter had categorized even before Gilbert and Gubar. While making an effort to describe the female literary tradition in the English novel from the generation of the Brontes to Angela Carter and the 1990’s, she identifies three stages, ‘feminine’, ‘feminist’, and ‘female’. She identifies the first phase as “the period from the appearance of the male pseudonym in the 1840’s to the death of George Eliot in 1880”; the second phase as “1880 to 1920, or the winning of the vote”; and the third phase “as 1920 to the present, but entering a new stage of self-awareness about 1960” (Showalter 2009: 13).

When there is a discussion about women’s writings, it is primarily the relationship of female experience to the process of writing. The activity of writing is apparently open to everyone. After all, Jane Austen and many like her could and did write in the drawing room at home. Class and income obviously have a great
deal to do with writing. Interestingly, women are able to accept their marginalized status and they are able to integrate this crucial aspect of their lives in their writings and speech. Women’s writing immediately draws our attention to a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are both covertly and overtly patriarchal (Gilbert and Gubar 2007: 21). Even though we do not find women’s writing as a very empowering act in the period under consideration, we also have to take into account the terrible odds against which a creative female subculture was established. With such a literary culture, - where women’s act of holding a pen is in itself an act of violation, where to write is to violate for women, where language itself is inadequate to express women’s experiences, where women experience a deep sense of alienation, and have to fight their internalization of patriarchal structures in order to establish themselves in the domains of writing, speaking, and rationalizing - women had to undergo a lot of social, political, cultural pressures in order to write and express themselves. The vocation of writing itself for women is not very new. Sappho’s lyric poems, which had created a furor in the ancient Greek society of the sixth century B.C., are studied even now for their content and form as well as for their historical significance. Hypatia, the daughter of Theon of Alexandria, was in late antiquity a writer on science and mathematics, as well as an inventor and teacher.

Women in India also have been writing from ancient times. According to Tharu and Lalitha:

The earliest known anthology of women’s literature - in India certainly, but possibly anywhere in the world – took shape when the songs composed by the
Buddhist theris, or senior nuns, which date back to the sixth century B.C. were collected into the Therigatha. The poets were evidently contemporaries of the Buddha, though the 522 stanzas of the collection that has come down to us were committed to writing only around 80 B.C. Each lyric in this collection as well as in the companion volume of songs composed by the monks is a testimony, for it bears witness to a life transformed by the Buddha’s teachings and celebrates a release, sometimes from the toil and hardship of everyday life, but more often from a “hidden shaft” lodged in the heart, or from a consuming anxiety (Tharu and Lalitha 2004: 65).

Buddha’s teachings allowed the minds of these women to roam about, to wander, and to gather experiences outside the confinement of a domestic life traditionally denied to women. These lyricists hint at a variant of freedom:

So free am I, so gloriously free,

Free from three petty things-

From mortar, from the pestle and from my twisted lord,

Freed from rebirth and death I am,

And all that has held me down

Is hurled away.

(Tharu and Lalitha 2004: 68)

It is the freedom of nirvana in their newly acquired world enriched with Buddha’s preachings that Mutta refers to in the above quoted poem.

All these texts have contributed considerably to the emergence and shaping of a new discipline – women’s writings. However, feminist literary criticism read women’s writings as a transparent expression of women’s authentic experience and
different from the stereotypes of mainstream literature. ‘Women’s experience’ itself is a problematic issue as all women across the globe cannot be socially constituted as a homogeneous group with similarity in their experiences. Paula ML Moya and Michael R Hames-Garcia write that

‘Women’s experience’ can only be understood as an arbitrary construct. Indeed, any account of “women’s experience” risks naturalizing one group of women’s experience as normative and thereby marginalizing that of another group’s (Moya and Hames-Garcia 2003: 3).

Insistence on regional class and caste variation of patriarchal practices and their diverse histories depicting women’s autonomous movements in order to register their ‘presence’ in various activities related to the public/political space is necessary. In the field of writing and publication Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha’s anthology *Women Writing in India* (1991) presents before us an altogether different perspective, which perhaps the writers mentioned above, have not been able to work out. The two volumes of this anthology trace an entire tradition of women writing in India from the Medieval period to the twentieth century locating women’s responses to various historical developments and cultural upheavals of their times. By attempting to do so, Tharu and Lalitha insist on ‘difference’ in women’s experiences and situations. There may be other immediate contexts for women’s writing which may not have anything to do with the images of women in mainstream literature. Tharu and Lalitha’s intention as is evident from their *Introduction* is not merely to project an essential female nature struggling the world over, to free itself from male bondage but at the same time to look at other
crucial contexts that have enabled women to write and express themselves. One such vital context is that of British colonialism and its resultant imperialism and its outcome. The pressing demand for the formation of a national as well as a social identity and the need felt by women to express their opinions on similar issues is what concerns the two authors. In this regard, they write that in

…the process of posing, elaborating, analyzing, and resolving questions of gender, and projecting their resolutions as female reality, Western feminists from the liberal mainstream drew on a whole range of significations and inferential logics attached to them already in circulation, which constituted the common sense of their society (Tharu and Lalitha 2004: 37).

Their aim was to make the old universalism fade and make way for the appearance of the many worlds with their multiple concerns, complex ideologies, and contested positions. Women’s writing seen from this broader angle ceases to be primarily Western and white, but tends to display different worlds, which exist at the margins of patriarchies reconstituted by the emerging bourgeoisies of empire and the nation. Tharu and Lalitha look at numerous writings by indigenous women and try to establish the notion that the rhetorical practices they adopt also constitute sites of knowledge production and their words and experiences can contribute towards a feminist theory that is in essence not Western. Elizabeth Archuleta in her consideration of indigenous women’s writings as means of survival examines how they reject Western tools, worldviews, or epistemologies as methods of interpretation and theorize their lives in the manner they live it (Archuleta 2006: 88-89).
II

Feminist criticism has always objected to the reduction of rationality to one mode of thinking. The philosophical accounts of the notion of reason have been based on the exclusion of woman and the association of woman with irrationality. Reason is transcendence from the feminine principle that is associated with passion and instincts. Cartesian philosophy advocates a ‘complete separation of the rational mind from the body,’ and therefore, woman, who was already associated with matter, comes to be associated with what is outside reason. In his early dialogues, Plato conceives of rational knowledge as involving transcendence of matter, which is represented as feminine. Transcendence involves going beyond matter and the material body, and leaving them behind. Rousseau’s account of reason claims that the feminine represents a kind of intellectual character and what is ideal for a woman is different from what is ideal for a man. Man should aspire to become good citizens like Emile while women should be good private persons like Sophie. Even their maternal role, which requires women’s energies to be preserved for the raising of their children, confers on women the domestic space. Without a legitimate access to public roles as well as space, women cannot also have access to the kinds of authority, prestige, and cultural value that are the prerogatives of men.

Women, thus, are excluded from cultural projects of transcendence, and are limited to an existence largely dictated by their biology, which comes to be seen as more ‘natural’ and less ‘cultural’ than men are. They come to be universally designated as the “second sex”: primarily from her social functions and biological
roles designed, controlled, and manipulated by changing and colluding patriarchies at various points of time (Lamphere 1974: 5). Whether the denial of power mechanisms and structures to women is reflected in their writings is a question that needs to be elaborately discussed. On the one hand, as seen in the case of the Theris poet writing expresses her flight from the confinements of the domestic sphere and a freedom from her “twisted lord.” On the other hand, Bahinabai, a seventeenth century Marathi woman writer in her Atmanivedana, that is “an autobiographical account of her soul’s journey” ultimately resolves the conflict between her self and her husband by rejecting freedom, by curbing her dreams of the seventeenth century low caste sudra poet Tukaram and resigning herself to her fate:

What am I to do with my Fate? I must bear whatever comes to my lot. I am not the one who is possessed. My body is not subject to demoniac possession. Therefore, holding to my own special duties, I will give my mind to listening to the Scriptures, and the winning of God. My duty is to serve my husband, for he is God to me.…

(Tharu and Lalitha 2004: 114-15)

However, such resignation to fate was not the dominant characteristic of women’s writings of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whereas men observed the new kind of society because of the European encounter with wonder, women did not have much to celebrate. The social reform movement, which promised a new life and position for women, was merely a replacement of one patriarchy with another. Europe came to India predominantly through powerful
rationalist narratives with women playing a specific role – that of an excellent house keeper, an efficient companion, and a good mother. Their writings and other biographical accounts exemplify the dilemma that women faced when confronted with freedom on the one hand and limitations to it on the other. The nationalist movement chose to create an image of the Indian woman who was not socially victimized, but voluntarily chose the path of suffering and death in order to save her people. Women writers seem to have internalized such an agenda and projected themselves or the characters they invented as the ‘ideal woman’ of the male nationalist discourse. Therefore, it becomes difficult to outline the stark contrasts between the male nationalist discourse and the female discourse.

Susie Tharu while analyzing the implications of the nationalist movement and of Indo-Anglian literature in middle-class patriarchal norms investigates the character of Savitri as she came to be represented in the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Toru Dutt’s “Savitri” is projected as “a free woman”; she has a boyish freedom to wander, to choose her friends, and even, the freedom to choose her own husband. The poem insists that this was true of all Indian women in the pre-zenana days and thereby redeems a past in which women were held in high esteem. Through this poem, the poet hints at the various ways in which “freedom may be imagined” by women from different spheres of life (Tharu and Lalitha 2004: 260). In her well-researched essay “Women and Freedom” Firdous Azim takes up for analysis Toru Dutt’s poetry as part of the project of defining the emerging nationalist space through a concentration on the figure of the woman. Toru Dutt makes “Savitri a symbol of freedom, of freedoms that were
once enjoyed by women in India, but which were now lost. In her letters to her
English friend “freedom” is “not political freedom” but a freedom to “wander, and
roam.” (Azim 2002: 397). Aurobindo Ghosh’s Savitri though born mortal was
actually a divine being who had the capacity and wisdom to transform darkness
into light, unreal into real and death into immortality. Through his epic, Ghosh
creates the image of a supreme woman who through her patience, will power,
undaunting courage, and, love fulfils her *patibrata dharma* and becomes one with
the Creator. Tharu thus concludes by saying that women in Indo-Anglian literature
served the purpose of serving the needs of an emerging nationalism (Tharu 1991:
265).

The colonial presence thus led to a considerable collective introspection
among the Indian educated upper middle classes on issues relating to both the
familial and public spheres. They came to be preoccupied with the influences of
modernity. In this regard, Dorothy Griffiths and Esther Saraga note,

From the middle of the last century, there was a growing belief in the West that as
men and women were essentially unlike, they should have access to different
kinds of education. Notions of differentness included a widespread belief that as
the structure and size of a woman's brain was unlike that of a man’s, it should not
be overloaded with excessive analysis and mathematics. Further, there was a fear
that too much intellectual work during puberty would lead to ill health, which
would ultimately affect a woman's reproductive capacities” (in Karlekar 2000:
129).
Reflecting the trend in Britain, the ideology of biological difference and hence of separate spheres gained ground and the rudiments of the three Rs, basic English and Bengali as well as hygiene, needlework, embroidery and music were regarded as appropriate for the girls from bhadralok families (Karlekar 1986: 129-30). As discussed in the next chapter, girls’ education involved a set of prescriptions on the kind of education they should receive which in no way should threaten a girl’s primary ultimate goal, that of a dutiful wife and mother (Karlekar 1986; Sarkar 2001; Chatterjee 1991). Women began writing in order to assert themselves and in order to defy the generally accepted doctrine that in all societies it was men who always laid down the ways in which women must behave. Women started reflecting and writing about their lives by the middle of the last century; the preferred form was the journal or diary. Several wrote many years later, often in widowhood. The role of the woman was increasingly perceived as moral guardian as well as companion to her husband; apart from this, the primary responsibility for childrearing rested with the mother, and “motherhood became a self-conscious vocation” (in Karlelar 2000: 129).

Autobiographies of women flooded the area of literature in and around the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Partha Chatterjee’s discussion of autobiographies “the most striking feature is the way in which the very theme of disclosure of self remains suppressed under a narrative of changing manners, and customs, and changing values” (Chatterjee 1999: 138). Rassundari Devi’s fascinating autobiography, *Amar Jiban*, records the details of her life, her childhood, marriage, and the daily round of domestic chores in a large joint family,
the clandestine manner in which she taught herself to read and write in her husband’s household using her sons’ texts. The book contains a picture of the changing rural world, the status and role of women and Rassundari’s own views on changing times and life on this earth. *Amar Jiban* portrays the changing world of rural Bengal and situates woman there. In her life and text Rassundari maintained many of the restrictive norms and rituals enjoined upon a traditional Hindu housewife, yet through her dispassionate, objective style and subject matter, and, through the very act of writing, forbidden to women not so long ago, Rassundari Devi was engaged in a unique act of emancipation:

> It was so strange! I had never seen the book yet I had been reading it in my dream. For an illiterate person like me, it would have been absolutely impossible to read such a difficult book. Anyhow, I was pleased that I was able to perform this impossible feat at least in my dreams. (in Tharu and Lalitha 2004: 200).

She submitted to as well as resisted a patriarchy that was premodern; her strategies of resistance also sprang out of traditions that far predated the advent of “women’s education” as an agenda of nationalist reform (Chatterjee 1999: 144). Therefore, it becomes evident that the longing to know, to read, and, write in woman existed before the advent of colonial modernity. However, it was reformulated and projected as a male reformist agenda in the early half of the nineteenth century. In Bengal, for instance, by the middle of the last century, the new family, its roles and relationships as well as images of the new woman flooded the pages of journals, newspapers, autobiographies, and of course novels and plays (Karlekar 1991; Sarkar 1995). All these together contribute towards bourgeois domesticity in
colonial Bengal. Dipesh Chakrabarty asserts that the ideas relating to bourgeois domesticity, privacy, and individuality came to India via British rule (Chakrabarty 2004: 232). The idea of modernity was adopted by the Indian middle class thereby leading them to question the lack of order and discipline in the domestic sphere. Nationalists, according to Chakrabarty, connected personal discipline to the discipline in public life from where the ‘nation’ would eventually emerge.

III

The complex socio-economic and intellectual currents that swept through almost the whole of India during the second half of the nineteenth century is termed as Renaissance (Misra 1987; Dasgupta 2007). The impact of these new ideas was felt in Assam for the first time after this region came under British rule in 1826. Assamese students from Guwahati, Tezpur, Barpeta, Sibsagar, were studying in Calcutta when winds of change were blowing across the city (Gohain 1993: 126; Barua 2004: 97). Through them ideas of transforming the domestic space by improving the condition of women, and educating them, reached Assam. Like in the rest of India, even in colonial Assam education and literature was the sole preserve of men of a few privileged castes and others, including women, were kept away from such pursuits on various pretexts including the one which claims that women are irrational and do not have a capacity to think. However, the advent of the American Baptist Missionaries and their wives led to a change in the education system. The wives of the Missionaries also wrote articles for and at times helped in editing the Baptist news magazine Orunodoi. It was the first platform, which initiated Assamese women into the field of writing. Apart from
Eliza Whitney Brown, Harriet B. Cutter, and Susan M. Ward, at least three native women wrote for *Orunodoi* – Subhadri, Numali Safford, and Kunti Carolyn Simon. Subhadri’s piece titled “Life Preserved by a Bible” in Assamese narrates the tale of a Christian man who at the end of a battle realized that he had narrowly escaped death as the enemy’s bullet pierced right through the Bible he was carrying in his satchel instead of him (*Orunodoi*: 1114). Kunti’s piece citing a couple of strange stories, gives an account of the false superstitions that people generally have. She argues that hurdles in our life arise because of our own bad deeds, for not heeding God’s words, and not because of ‘inauspicious’ living or non-living objects (*Orunodoi*: 1173). Numali’s piece written in Assamese titled “Healing of Naaman the Leper” illustrates the consequences one has to face because of excessive greed and other bad deeds. She eulogizes the strength of prayer and faith in the Almighty (*Orunodoi*: 1178). It is evident that Christianity and its emphasis on good deeds and sacrifice heavily influenced these writings, even though claims have always been made that *Orunodoi* believed in secular writing, there were definite traces of propagating Christianity throughout.

The situation of the Assamese woman writer in the nineteenth century and her struggles for self-expression, both, to write and to be published, can be seen in the career of Padmavati Devi Phukanani, who can be rightly considered the first Assamese women writer (Mahanta 2008: 153). She was initiated into education primarily at home by her progressive father, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, when she was five years old (Barua 2004: 109). With his help, Phukanani published her two books, *Sudharmar Upakhyan* (1884) and *Hittasadhika* (1892). *Hittasadhika* is
a text, which discusses in detail the virtues that young children have to acquire from their early days and nurture for the rest of their lives and those vices that they should avoid. The virtues and vices identified by the writer are – knowledge, piety, humility, pride, jealousy etc. In her article titled ‘Bidhaba’, she portrays the pain that Hindu women as widows have to face throughout their lives. “The very word is frightening for any woman primarily because our society inflicts innumerable sufferings in the form of restrictions (do’s and don’ts) on widows” (Phukanani 1994: 63). However, even though Phukanani tries to address such women-centric issues she could not really present her observations in a light, which may be considered as being different from the male writings. Phukanani wrote in spite of witnessing the deaths of fifteen out of eighteen children (Buzarbarua 1994: 104). Diseases, illness, despair and madness governed the lives of nineteenth century women and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar try to establish this in the case of women in Victorian England but it was equally true for women the world over.

It cannot be denied that the first generation of Assamese women writers were helped, guided, and encouraged in their literary pursuits by the progressive men in their lives, be it their father, or their husband. Writer and reformer, Gunabhiram Barua encouraged his wife Bishnupriya Devi, daughter Swarnalata Devi, and niece Padmavati Devi to write for Assam Bandhu and arranged for the publication of books written by them (Mahanta 2008: 156). Nalinibala Devi’s (1898-1977) life also repeats the same story as it was under her father’s influence and guidance that she began writing and became a poet of repute. Widowed after eight years of marriage, a mother of four children and carrying her fifth child, she
returned to her father’s home with him. In her autobiography *Eri Aha Dinbor* she writes how her father supported her by declaring, “my life as a father would be blessed to see my child in the white attire of *Sarvashukla Maheshweta* (apparently referring to Goddess Saraswati)” (Devi 1994: 61). These inspiring words made a deep impact on her, encouraging her to face the challenges of life with confidence. At first, she found solace in the pages of the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagvad Gita* and in the songs composed by Rabindranath Tagore and after that, she started composing numerous poems, which were published in Assamese magazines such as *Ghar Jeuti*, and *Awahan*. Even though she never challenged the prescribed norms for women within a patriarchal set-up or rebelled against women’s fate, she definitely carved a space for women like her in the social and literary arena. Nalinibala Devi with her compelling presence placed Assamese women firmly in the history of Assamese literature and language.

Thus, women were actively present in the literary scene of the early twentieth century Assam. In order to make an assessment of and appreciate the ‘woman’s text’ in the period under consideration, the complexities at work regarding the whole enterprise of colonialism is necessary. Colonialism is not merely the binary framework at work where the colonizers occupy a superior position when compared to the colonized. Different layers of significations are at work here, which do not occupy the realms of politics and society but also the complex realms of epistemology and ontology. Instead of looking at ‘what’ happened when two alien cultures met or rather were forcibly put together, the focus should be on ‘how’ it happened. There is no denying the fact that western
power-knowledge with its fixed signs vested with totalitarian powers divests the colonized of all claims to an autonomous life made parasitic upon the master discourse of colonialism (Sarkar 2001: 24). It became imperative to have nationalist discourses as challenges to the master discourse of colonialism that was facilitated through the mediation of vernacular printed journals, which describe the developments toward the formation of a public sphere acting as a bridge between the colonizers and the colonized. This virtual public sphere created via the print medium made “it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about and to relate themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways” (Anderson 1983: 36). These printed journals described contemporary events and developments in the arena of oppositions and resistances as well as sympathetic observations followed by a firm establishment of British rule, in close and vivid detail and opened up such activities to widespread debate and comment.

Vir Bharat Talwar while trying to draw the trajectory of women writing in the Hindi-speaking belt in the late nineteenth century, mentions the name of Bhartendu Harishchandra of Benaras who brought out a Hindi journal for women called *Bala Bodhini* in 1874. *Stree Darpan, Grihalakshmi, Arya Mahila, Chand* were some of the important women oriented magazines published from this extensive belt (Talwar 1999: 204). Sonal Shukla, in her account of Gujarati journal *Stree Bodh*, maintains that the social reformers and cultural revivalists in the 19th century, and nationalists in the early decades of the twentieth century, published journals for women in Gujarati, with a view to ‘educating’ them and preparing them for the roles they expected women to play in their scheme of things (Shukla 1991:
Judith Walsh in her extensive study of domestic manuals in colonial Bengal mentions the numerous women’s magazines and manuals for women which flooded the market allowing the authors to “reimagine and represent the domestic world and contextualize their concerns within it” (Walsh 1997: 649). One set of texts were those authored by both conservative and liberal minded males where their primary concern was to eulogize or denunciate or do both at the same time, the older traditions of Hinduism⁶ and prescribe women’s conduct and behavior thereby asserting a new patriarchy – one modeled on the requirements of the emerging nation and its future citizens. An examination of most of these texts reveal that in the discursive field of anticolonial nationalism, the new patriarchy resolved the “women’s question” so completely as to remove social reform as an issue from the discourse of nationalism. Assuming that women would support them, a discourse of nationalism emerged which looked toward the woman – the inner core of the community - to sacrifice their issues regarding equality and emancipation or at least to merge them with the larger concerns of the nation in such a way that they finally cease to exist at all (Chatterjee 2004: 117). The other set of texts, the ones that the present work is concerned with, are those authored by women primarily for an audience of women, with varied concerns including women’s emancipation, her right to education, right to work. At the same time, they having internalized the ideals set by the new patriarchy for its own benefit had to comply with the nationalist enterprise. Thus at one level, there existed a contradiction between what the women should have done for their emancipation and what they actually did. For the sake of the welfare of the emerging nation women had to contribute by restructuring the domestic sphere and even
participating in the events of the public sphere through various activities including writing.

Unlike the rest of India, progress in the matter of women’s education and women writing in Assam was slow. However, by the twentieth century, women were writing and publishing. The magazines and periodicals, which were extensively published and widely circulated, were other important spaces for women to publish their short stories, poems, articles etc. Every issue of Ghar Jeuti carried short stories, poems, articles, short biographies of prominent men and women such as Sarojini Naidu, Lala Lajpat Rai. In addition to women’s problems, which formed the subject matter of these magazines, there were articles on topics that the editors felt women should be informed about such as the American Civil War, voting rights of women in Turkey, Women’s Associations in China, etc which were mostly translations from a Bengali periodical published from Calcutta titled Bangalaksmi (Ghar Jeuti: 909-911). Articles in Ghar Jeuti covered a wide range of subjects – some of which were burning topics of their contemporary times such as female education, the need for women to participate in the civil-political space facilitated by the nationalist movement. Aparna Mahanta in her introduction to Ghar Jeuti makes an assessment on how this magazine was successful in providing an excellent platform for women to break away the barrier and hesitation of writing and expressing: “It was as if Ghar Jeuti broke away an unseen barrier – the inclusion of women’s writing and women related news in magazines became a day to day affair which was initially unthinkable proposition. And this happened because of the courage that Ghar Jeuti displayed.” (Mahanta 2008: 0.22)
In one such article titled “Gaonwolia Tirotar Jiban” (The Life of a Rural Woman) the writer emphasizes on the necessity of preserving one’s racial identity and not letting winds of undesirable change enter the ‘inner core’ of the community (*Ghar Jeuti*: 335). These journals allowed “a cross section of thinking men, and even a few fortunate women, without formal learning, to develop and express ideas within a public debate over the shape of their own daily lives” (Sarkar 2001: 28). The newly created space allows women to participate by being engaged in receiving, absorbing, rejecting, and supplementing the ‘new’ ideas that were floating around. Tanika Sarkar in her study on the nineteenth century Bengali consciousness remarks thus:

The public sphere, at this stage, remained integrally linked to domestic issues. A substantial number of journals and newspapers came into existence to debate issues of sati, kulin marriage, widow remarriage – domestic issues which generated a wide range of authors and readers, from Bankim Chandra to the Battala farces (Sarkar 2001: 25).

Tanika Sarkar is referring to that interesting phase of history when Bengal witnessed a massive increase in the production of cheap books, booklets, tracts, and pamphlets written for a literate but little-educated, sprawling readership and authorship which rarely read or wrote anything else (Sarkar 2001: 26). Through Bengal, similar changing trends made their presence felt in the yet-to-be developed intellectual landscape of Assam. The Assamese language, which had recently attained a status of its own due to the efforts of the American Baptist Missionaries and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, also grew after the entry of print.
In an article published in *Orunodoi* “Asomiya aru Bengali Bhasar Kathupakathan” (Conversation Between the Assamese and Bengali Languages), the writer personalizes ‘Asomiya bhasa’ (Assamese language) as a mother who waits for her sons to come back to her. On one occasion, this mother mentions the American ‘sahibs’ who have come from a far away land and are now working for her welfare. These ‘sahibs’ were none other than the American Baptist Missionaries who came to Assam in 1836 (*Orunodoi*). On March 23 1836, two American Baptists Nathan Brown and Oliver T. Cutter arrived with their families at Sadiya in Upper Assam. Brown carried with him the notion that Assamese was only a dialect of Bengali, but very soon realized that he was wrong. He started learning the language in a new light. Cutter, a printer by profession followed his footsteps and established the first printing press with hopes to publish books in Assamese. Brown rejected the earlier version of the Assamese Bible prepared by William Carey as it was full of Sanskrit terms not easily understood or accepted by the local people. Brown launched a plan to make an Assamese version of the Bible in January 1838, which was carried forward by others until the turn of the nineteenth century. His version of the New Testament was published in 1848. His *Grammatical Notices of the Assamese Language* was published in 1848. However, his monumental work was the *Orunodoi*, which he edited continuously over the first nine volumes (1846-54). Miles Bronson (1812-83) another linguist joined them soon after. His greatest contribution to the cause of the restoration of the Assamese language was his sustained endeavors to see the language restored to the schools and courts of Assam.
In fact, in India as well as in Assam, it is the print medium, which developed as part of colonial modernity, which allowed women to express themselves. Reading and writing among a section of women became popular only with the advent of the printing press. Printing in India dates to the sixteenth century, when the Portuguese set up the first printing press on the subcontinent, but the printing and publishing industry really took off in Assam in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, Partha Chatterjee notes print-capitalism in the colonial situation cannot be assessed in terms of European patterns of development (Chatterjee 2004: 7). Citing the example of Bengal, he says that the European missionaries along with the East India Company initiated the process of producing printed books in Bengali during the end of the eighteenth century. A similar situation is to be seen even in Assam where the American Baptist missionaries started printing books in Assamese for various purposes, the chief among them being spreading their own religion. The Baptist Missionaries took this position in opposition to the stand taken by the East India Company that Assamese was a mere dialect of Bengali. Only after this initial step did the Assamese intelligentsia come to think of its own language as belonging to that inner domain of cultural identity, from which the colonial intruder had to be kept out. For the Missionaries, Assamese was a language that had to be mastered for gaining access to crucial local information. However, in the active intellectual climate that had been stirred up following the close encounter with the West, Assamese gradually became the medium of self-expression of conscious and articulate urban literati. Of course, the fact remains that through this print culture literature by women in the printed form was circulated amongst the intelligentsia, which becomes part of the colonial
educational curriculum. At the same time, the printing press becomes an active agent in the spread of nationalist, revolutionary ideas, ideas of nation formation etc. Print revolutionized reading habits and possibilities of non-authors taking up writing rose, primarily as a way of participating in the formation of a civil-political space from where the issue of independence and swaraj could be taken up. A large corpus of cheap Bengali novels and similar reading materials were available for a barely literate reading public. Such new enterprises were received with new kinds of anxiety about a ‘modernity’, which was all set to disrupt the ancient, peaceful, patriarchal order. A section of the more conservative men like Lambodar Bora, Ratneswar Mahanta viewed present time as degenerate.

Along with such disruptive influences, Bengali consciousness allowed the entry of Renaissances into the intellectual scenario of Assam. The publication of journals at the various marked the progress of the Assamese mind and their capacity to evolve a nationalistic consciousness. The journals provided for a much-needed platform where men and even few women of Assam expressed ideas within a public debate over the shape of their own lives. The new authors and readers carved an autonomous discursive field where polyphony of voices coexisted – some conservative, some reformists and some others conformists. Within this shared yet contested enterprise, the Assamese middle class could certainly make their presence felt. At the same time, they got their own positions regarding matters as varied as the language debate, the need to develop the literature of Assam, the emerging nationalist consciousness, the need to encourage patriotism, yet the need to secure one’s roots and not allow the winds of change to affect the inner core of
the ‘race’ on the ‘community’. On the one hand, there is an active support toward the pan-Indian version of the freedom struggle. On the other hand, at a different level, there is the fear of the ‘other’ – in the form of the Englishman, Englishwoman or ‘memsahib’ and in the form of the sari-clad Bengali housewife, who poses a constant threat to the simple minded rural woman of Assam. The Assamese society was at crossroads where it was confronted with two other dissimilar cultures and where it had to allow the penetration of certain influences, thinking processes, which required a cross-cultural mentality, and the outlook of universalism. What came to be especially feared were women themselves, who challenged or resisted the attempted fossilization of their lives, and insisted on their subjectivity. Relegating women to the domestic, a spiritualized domain, seemingly away from the political, public, and material concerns was advocated as a means of resurrecting the Hindu male’s self-pride (Malhotra 1994: 40). It was also the way for improving the Hindu home, which had to substitute for the world outside where the Hindu male was bereft of my power or control. He becomes within the home what he can never aspire to be outside it. “The central concern of new patriarchal constructs was the reformulation of the domestic world, both to create a “new woman” more suited to contemporary life in British India and simultaneously, to create within the private space of the ‘home an area of autonomous power and authority for men whose ‘public’ lives were spent under conditions of British domination and control” (Walsh 1997: 650).

Educated Assamese women attempted to publish articles which reflect the needs of the society of their times. Women’s education, widow remarriage,
women’s liberation, and empowerment, inculcation of virtues and moral values in children, problems of women in various parts of the globe and other such issues received attention in this journal. In his letter published in *Ghar Jeuti*, Kamalakanta Bhattacharya stresses on the awakening of mothers, which according to him is actually the awakening of the entire community (*Ghar Jeuti*: 162). He also suggests that the Assamese community should be very careful in rendering higher education to its youth: “what we need today is real education, the kind of education which will help us to become wise human beings.” That kind of education can only be attained through one’s mother tongue (matrivasha). For that the writer suggests, each district should have newspapers and magazines. He makes an interesting observation here, which explains the short-livedness of the above-mentioned magazines published in Assam. He writes, “newspapers cannot sustain due to the lack of readers and writers” (*Ghar Jeuti*: 162). Even the few readers who express the willingness to read are hesitant to pay the nominal money, according to the writer. He appealed to the mothers of Assam to arise to analyze, to think of ways to break away the chains of slavery. He praises the efforts of the editors of *Ghar Jeuti* for their commendable work (*Ghar Jeuti*: 163). Indeed, *Ghar Jeuti* was an excellent platform for women to both read and write about their contemporary world and participate in generating a discourse on so many important topics. For women, conceptualizing a public sphere that non-coercively unifies consensus and builds a discourse in which the subjects favor rationally motivated agreements, remains outside their reality. Women’s reality, despite their presence and intervention in the public sphere, is confined largely to the private sphere or to its margins. They tend to operate from its margins thereby fulfilling
the prerequisites of both the worlds and without disrupting the order of the ‘home’ and the ‘world’. Kamalakanta Bhattacharya in his letter expresses this very disorder as he continues to regard woman as symbols of the private and at the same time places on her ‘fragile’ shoulders the massive task of reforming the public sphere thereby making it suitable for swaraj or self-government.

Dwipeshwari Gohain, the writer of “Gaonwalia Tirotar Jiban” is unhappy with the changes taking place in the rural areas of Assam because of the encounter with modernity, which had floated in from the rest of the country. Similar tendencies of isolating the Assamese community from the changes taking place in the rest of the country is to be found in male writings as well particularly in Ghar Jeuti, and other magazines like Assam Bandhu, Mou, Banhi, Usha. Gohain writes:

The foul smelling wind of female education is blowing everywhere. This wind has excited the minds of many. It is for us to discern whether education means acquiring the ability to read and write alone or it includes acquiring household skills as well. The kind of education, which helps in removing all wants from human lives, is education in the real sense of the term (Ghar Jeuti: 336).

She highlights the agrarian nature of our society, stressing on the need of division of labour for such an economy to thrive. Such a society should be guarded against all kinds of outer influences to preserve its ‘purity’. However, she stresses on the need to improve the spinning and weaving sector, which she considers as the lifeline of an Assamese village, by using newer techniques (Ghar Jeuti: 337). This obviously means that the Assamese agrarian society has to be receptive without which progress would be hindered. There is an obvious disparity of thoughts on the
part of the writer; yet it becomes clear that the emphasis is on evolving a work culture, which will ensure the progress of the race.

Durbasundari Gogoi’s “Ghar Ghaini” (Housewife) reiterates the Victorian ‘Angel in the House’ image of the woman (Ghar Jeuti: 165-168). It shows that the wife, the presiding hearth angel of Victorian social myth, actually performed a more significant and extensive economic and political function than is usually perceived. Elizabeth Langland in her discussion of the Victorian novel writes thus:

The prevailing ideology regarded the house as a haven, a private domain opposed to the public sphere of commerce, but the house and its mistress in fact served as a significant adjunct to a man's business endeavors. Whereas husbands earned the money, wives had the important task of administering the funds to acquire or maintain social and political status. Running the middle-class household, which by definition included at least one servant, was an exercise in class management, a process both inscribed and revealed in the Victorian novel. Novelists and novels, I argue, do not simply reflect the contemporary ideology. Rather, by depicting a material reality filled with and interpreted through ideology, they also expose ideology. Although the nineteenth-century novel presents the household as a secure and moral shelter from economic and political storms, another process is at work alongside this figuration: the active deployment of class power. The novel, in sum, stages the ideological conflict between the domestic angel in the house and her other (the worker or servant), exposing through the female characters the mechanisms of middle-class control, including those mechanisms that were themselves fictions, stratagems of desire (Langland 1992: 291).
The rise of the middle class is often associated with the strong ideologies of domesticity. This was in turn dependent on a clear division between the public and private spheres with “the home seen as a haven of peace, a source of stability, security, virtue and piety, held together by moral and emotional bonds, a construct modeled on the heavenly home to which all who experienced personal conversion might aspire” (in Blunt 1991: 424). The rise of industrial capitalism led to the growing separation of home and work, the growth and increasing wealth of the middle class, and an increasing valorization of home and domesticity as sites of both consumption and the reproduction of labour power. Because of these developments, according to Catherine Hall, the housewife came to embody feminine discourses of bourgeois domesticity, which later became an effective model for Indians and the Assamese:

Women became considerably less important in the direct creation of surplus value but more important in the reproduction of conditions for labour power - the family had to become the training ground of rational men. With the development of capitalism comes the separation of capital from labour, the separation of the home from the place of work and the separation of domestic labour and commodity production (in Blunt 1999: 424).

The rise of the bourgeoisie middle class also led to the strengthening of the notion of “separate spheres” fixing the private sphere as the space where the woman would remain. The bourgeois wife and mother, responsible for maintaining the home as a haven for her working husband, were often embodied as 'the angel in the house'. However, this ‘angel’ according to Elizabeth Langland “performed a more
significant and extensive economic and political function than is usually perceived” (in Blunt 1999: 425). On the one hand, husbands earned the money, and on the other, wives had the important task of administering the funds to acquire or maintain social and political status.

In fact, Gogoi’s text follows a similar pattern of internalizing the European modern emphasizing on one of the British-instituted modern political structures – the bourgeoisie family followed by a desire for order and discipline (Ghar Jeuti: 167). The desire for order and discipline in the domestic sphere was a modernist phenomenon, which was making its presence felt in various parts of the country because of the collusion of two very different cultures. What is interesting is also the fact that the issue of bourgeoisie domesticity came to Assam via Bengal via the British rule - Bengali magazines and other writings, and Bengali intelligentsia with whom select Assamese individuals were in close communion in Calcutta. In her presidential address, in the Kunwarpur Mahila Sabha, Kamalalaya Kakoti writes thus:

Nowadays, there are methodical books available on housekeeping, child rearing, home remedies for common diseases etc. an uneducated housewife would not be able to read and follow the instructions in such manuals. How to run a household with a limited amount of money i.e. household economics can be learnt through books. However, how will an uneducated woman learn all this? If we compare an English family, belonging to a middle-income group to a rich families of our country the matter will be clear. Though the Englishman will not possess any luxury at his home, yet his choice of furniture will display cleanliness and
discipline. Our people might have a number of costly objects but these would not be properly placed (Ghar Jeuti: 746).

The reason lies in the education of the British housewife and her awareness of the values of being economic while running a household, of which the Assamese woman is not aware of. Dipesh Chakrabarty sees this as a way of thinking that captured the Indian (in this case the Assamese mind) and he writes thus:

The British were powerful, it was argued, because they were disciplined, orderly, and punctual in every detail of their lives, and this was made possible by the education of their women who brought the virtues of domestic discipline into the home. The ‘Indian’ home, a colonial construct, now fared badly in their writings on modern domesticity (Chakrabarty 2004: 234).

He identifies this self-division of the colonial subject as a ‘split’ and that “writing history is performing this split over and over again.” The revision of the colonial home may be regarded as that point in history which is “recognizably modernist, and it is what the Indian modern shared with the European modern.” (Chakrabarty 2004: 234). The woman’s question as has already been discussed is a part of this modernist agenda. The female self was also to be seen as a modern individual and the repercussions of such an idea was to be dealt with. Periodical literature of the times supported the dilemma and provided the necessary space for elaborate discussions in this regard.

Kanaklata Chaliha who was also one of the editors of Ghar Jeuti in an article titled “Sishu Mangal” (Child Welfare) writes thus:
A child is the prospective upholder of a nation’s future. No one except a child can be the redeemer of one’s ancestry, nation, as well as race. However, if this child is weak and sickly instead of being healthy and strong, it will not be able to save its ancestry or its nation or its race. In India, the high rate of infant mortality has shoved the nation’s future into darkness (*Ghar Jeuti*: 178).

In trying to identify reasons for such a phenomenon, the writer regards women’s ignorance regarding health and hygiene as the most important one. Women here according to her are not adequately aware of midwifery and childcare and if some are aware they do not really bother to take care of minute details. The other reasons that she cites are - the lack of proper medical facilities, the poor economy of the country, poverty, and the lack of trained midwives (*Ghar Jeuti*: 179). She mentions about the progress made in these fields by other developed countries of the West. She believes it is because of the love and attention that children receive that these nations (which she refers to as *jati*) are so developed. She makes it very clear that the progress of a nation depends upon the health of its progeny. According to her, the immediate solution to the problem would be the rise in the number of educated and trained mid-wives.

In another article “Jagaronot Atmanirvarata” (Role of Self Dependency in Awakening) Dibyalata Barua adopts the technique of eulogizing the West and denunciating India and Indians. There is the urgent need in writings such as this one, of looking to the more civilized nations of the West where women’s movements had already reached their zenith. These women according to the writer have successfully challenged the atrocities and injustices meted out by the
patriarchal societies. She blames the Hindu social laws as inscribed in the ancient
texts for the unfortunate and deprived condition of Indian women in general. The
women of Assam, according to her, are so dependant on their men-folk that they
turn to them for support:

However, in this age of new awakening (navajagaran) the women’s community is
opposing the age-old dogmas and standing against them. They have also claimed
equal rights with men. The spirit of woman’s awakening from far away Europe
and America, has crossed large water-bodies to spread among and leave its impact
on the minds of Indian women. However, a select few have through their doubts
and suspicion discouraged it, merely exhibiting the narrow mindedness. Yet,
broad-minded ones are making endless efforts to nurture and support women’s
movement in Assam (Ghar Jeuti: 949).

The notion of women’s awakening was popular among Indian women and
the need for it was felt among women in almost all parts of India. For women of
Assam the immediate reference point and their source of knowledge were Bengali
magazines. Through these, they became aware of all kinds of developments taking
place among women all over the world. An attempt was made to appropriate such
borrowed ideas. These texts “characterize women as a singular group on the basis
of shared oppression. What binds women together is a sociological notion of the
‘sameness’ of their oppression” (Mohanty 2004: 176). No attempt has been made
to uncover the material and ideological specificities that constitute a particular
group of women as ‘powerless’ in a particular context. However, it may be argued
that women here and the rest of India as well made use of the available models in
order to situate their nature of oppression. This may be regarded as a part of
colonial modernity wherein one’s own inabilities and flaws are recognized and compared to the progress made in the European world thereby reinforcing Western cultural imperialism and West’s superiority over the rest of the world. Images portraying Indian women as bonded, oppressed, marginalized, and Western woman as empowered, confident, and free were made use of by these writers. Kamalalaya Kakoti identifies two major causes for women’s marginalized status – first, men’s own selfishness and secondly, women’s inability to be efficient enough to claim her due rights (Ghar Jeuti: 745). The solution lay in acquiring education – a kind of education which would prepare the woman not for active participation in the public sphere or for earning money (a task specially reserved for the males) but for running the household smoothly and improving the domestic sphere.

Thus, the writings by women generated a discourse on modern domesticity that was further facilitated by rise of the civil society that demanded women’s active participation. Womankind as is depicted in the literature regarding Joymati Utsavs (elaborated in the fourth chapter) has to be the embodiment of patience, love, respect, kindness, and above all of sacrifice. “For the welfare of their men folk, women are ready to sacrifice everything. They are like Shakti Bhagawati (an image of Goddess Durga who resembled power and strength). Even then, timelessly in every era, in every nation, in every community, women are subordinate to men; they cannot and will not use force upon men. That is why in spite of being the embodiment of strength; they will remain the weaker sex.” – Thus, spoke Radhikanath Sharma in his brief address on Sibsagar Joymati Utsav held at Joysagar.in the year 1928 (Ghar Jeuti: 200). There is no doubt that the
speaker here adopts a patriarchal attitude and at the same time a liberal one and he is undoubtedly caught in the web of contradictions regarding the ‘modern individual’. Self-sacrifice was a recurrent theme in modern Indian public life, which showed that the highest form of personhood was one constituted by the idea of self-sacrifice, the idea of living for others. The community demanded that women possess this quality and sacrifice even their lives for the welfare of the community just as Joymati Kunwari had done.

Ratneswar Mahanta in the first part of his another series of publication, “Wife’s Duties and Woman’s Education” writes thus:

Why do we marry?….The chief reason for marriage is the need of a partner to perform family duties well. The man will protect the family from external hassles and the woman will take care of the home and hearth and bring up the children. She will be a provider of food and water to the members of the family, keep an eye on the servants; in a word, she will look to all small and big details of the family (Assam Bandhu: 192).

….Another important duty that the wife has to perform is that of complete devotion to her husband (Assam Bandhu: 193).

We find herein a clear-cut division between the chores of a man and woman, the latter being confined to the household so that the man can work comfortably outside the home without worrying about his family. This was a model of a bourgeois family even in Victorian England where men desired capable companions who would run their homes efficiently. By the nineteenth century, the British were coming to assume that a domestic structure that emphasized male
control and female domesticity constituted an essential component of civilized life (Hunt and Lessard 2002: 50). By way of the Calcutta connection (where already attempts were made to adopt this model) this idea must have struck the eager minds of the Assamese intelligentsia who were residing in Calcutta. Nationalist discourse desired a ‘new woman’ who could restructure the ‘domestic’ in terms of the European home.

Punyaprabha Das in her article titled “Jatiya Unnati” (National Progress) stresses on motherhood as an important and indispensable vocation for women. It is the mother who can instill love into the hearts of her children – an important prerequisite for national progress. Citing the popular proverb “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world,” the writer emphasizes on a woman’s primary responsibility of raising the child followed by offering a helping hand toward her husband in his work (Ghar Jeuti: 163). For her, therefore, like these other women writers, women contributes as well as participates in the formation of a nationalist discourse where their role is primarily to re-structure and improve the domestic sphere and be companions to men. The first step in this regard was to acquire education not just in the way men wanted them to be educated but also to develop the quest for knowledge and improvement in order to be a ‘modern individual’. The project of education in colonial India and Assamese women’s response to it through their writings will be explored in the next chapter.

Notes:

The translations of original Assamese texts both primary and secondary are mine.
Emile or A New System of Education is Jean Jacques Rousseau’s response to John Locke’s Some Thoughts Concerning Education, where he develops an educational program that would allow man’s natural goodness to evolve, without being corrupted by adverse social influences. In Book V of the text, the writer makes it clear that man and woman should receive different kinds of education suited to their distinct biological capacities and social roles. For Locke, unlike Rousseau, education was fundamentally the same for men and women—there were only small, obvious differences for women as he mentions in the sixth section of Some thoughts which can be accepted as an egalitarian text on educational theory.

http://womenshistory.about.com/od/hypati1/a/hypatia.htm. 19.03.2011

Orunodoi was originally edited by Dr. Nathan Brown from 1846 to 1854, compiled, and edited by Dr. Maheshwar Neog in 2003. Several articles remained anonymous as the identity of the authors who used only their initials were not known. Dr. Neog gives a list of names of authors some of which remained tentative. To avoid the confusion related to multiple authors and for the sake of convenience, references to Orunodoi in the chapters have only page numbers of the 2003 edition.

Aparna Mahanta mentions in her book Journey of Assamese Women 1836-1937 that these women were regular readers of Orunodoi as their names occur in the subscription lists. She identifies the similarity of the three pieces – “simple pieces of familiar preaching such as used by the missionary preachers and probably taught to the native helpers, the lay preachers…” (Mahanta 2008: 151)

Judith Walsh refers to this as “old patriarchy by which she means “older beliefs and practices regarding women that, in the nineteenth century, had a textual point of origin in Sanskritic literature and a customary point of origin in everyday life (Walsh 1997: 647).

In case of Ghar Jeuti also the same method of referencing has been followed. The page numbers refer to the reprint of the magazine compiled and edited by Aparna Mahanta and published in the year 2008.

In the article titled “Sadanandar Samachar” Lambodar Bora makes it clear that he is personally not against women’s education but feels that the syllabus for women should be related to run a house, which is her primary duty. In the article titled “Sadanandar Natun Abhidan”, Sadananda sets himself the task of defining a few terms of considerable importance in his times like ‘shikkha’, ‘reform’ or ‘samskar’, ‘stri shikkha’, ‘stri swadhinata’ etc. With regard to ‘reform’ the writer in a satirical note says:

“Among the Hindus there are a number of superstitions and evil customs. The attempt to remove them is reform”(Assam Bandhu: 262)
He gives an example: “I like to gaze at the faces of the wives and daughters of other men. But utroni (veil) poses a problem.” And he goes on to say that the efforts to do away with the veil are reform. He adds that reform encourages waywardness. Regarding stri shikkha he writes:

“the ability to write letters, to be preoccupied with reading novels and dramas and as a result to forget weaving, cooking, and other household chores...women becoming like men.”(Assam Bandhu: 263)

These words are gestured at the old fear about the immorality of the educated woman since the dreaded novels were of an exotic kind. This again relates to the fears mentioned by Tanika Sarkar in Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation– writing letters, for instance, might enable women to form illicit relationships with other men. The other fear was of women losing their natural, ‘feminine’ qualities and adopting ‘masculine’ ones after receiving education. Regarding women’s freedom (‘stri swadhinata’) also, the writer has similar opinions - ‘stri swadhinata’ means the ability acquired by women to leave her husband or at least not to accept him as a husband at all. This statement reminds one of the famous case of Rakhmabai, which traumatized the Maharashtrian society in 1884.

6 In the article titled “‘Swadhinata ne Sweshasar” (Freedom or Waywardness) the writer, Ratneshwar Mahanta critiques the terms ‘freedom’ and ‘dependence’. Taking the example of Savitri, Sita, and Sakuntala, he says that devotion to one’s husband, respect for elders, performing household chores make the lives of these women sacred. He finds fault in the reform movement, which has allowed women to step into the world outside leaving the confinement of the home. Differentiating between vernacular and new education, the writer says that the latter has made Assamese girls wayward and self-willed. This he says is not the freedom that a woman should get. He urges his readers to recognize the blunder they are committing by letting foreign education ruin the integrity of their culture.

Works Cited:


