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MIMICRY, AMBIVALENCE AND HYBRIDITY: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF INDIRA
GOSWAMI'S *THE BRONZE SWORD OF THENGPHAKHRI TEHSILDAR*

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ABSTRACT

The colonisers consider the natives as the 'other' and compel them to acknowledge the superiority of the colonisers as the natives are consistently taught that they have lots to learn from the white men and their culture. It is in this process that mimicry, ambivalence and hybridity emerge. Set in the colonial period Indira Goswami's novel *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* depicts the intense and complex relation between the colonisers and the colonised. The British officers in the novel try to impose their language, their style of living and western education on the native people and in trying to create a copy of the coloniser a hybrid and distorted image is formed which serves to be a threat to the colonisers. The present paper is an attempt to study the novel from the postcolonial perspective and in doing so we shall deal with mimicry, ambivalence and hybridity which are the major issues and concerns in postcolonial studies. The paper will show how the novel has represented mimicry, ambivalence and hybridity as tools of resistance towards colonialism by drawing the concept of Homi K. Bhabha. Indira Goswami's *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* appears as a successful novel recreated by the author from her memories of folklores, songs and stories which immortalises the unseen and unheard legendary heroine. Moreover, the translated fiction in English has helped to subvert the colonial discourse by the use of many local words and it has made its space in the mainstream Indian fictional world.

Keywords: Other, mimicry, ambivalence, hybridity.

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Set in the colonial period Indira Goswami's novel *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* depicts the intense and complex relation between the colonisers and the colonised. Goswami knits the story in a beautiful manner by the help of oral and historical sources and by recollecting the songs, stories and folktales that she heard in the past. She is able to immortalise the silenced voice, the forgotten, legendary Bodo heroine Thengphakhri, who was

arguably the first woman revenue collector (tehsildar) during the British regime in Assam. The present paper attempts to examine how the novel represents Homi K. Bhabha's notion of mimicry, ambivalence and hybridity as tools of resistance towards colonialism. While dealing with these issues we shall critically analyse the characters, their different attitudes and various events constituting the narrative.

The colonisers consider the natives as the 'other' and compel them to acknowledge the superiority of the colonisers as the natives are consistently taught that they have lots to learn from the white men and their culture. It is in this process that mimicry, ambivalence and hybridity emerge. The British officers in the novel try to impose their language, their style of living and western education on the native people and in trying to create a copy of the coloniser a hybrid and distorted image is formed which serves to be a threat to the colonisers.

Mimicry in simple term, refers to the action of imitation of one by another and according to Homi K. Bhabha, as mentioned in his essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse": "...colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 86). In Indira Goswami's thought-provoking novel *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*, Macklinson exerts the superiority of the British as follows: "Remember, we shall turn this beautiful land into an Eden. It is because of our efforts that you will not smell the burnt flesh of satis but instead you will get the light of Western education. Thengphakri, your children will get the light of education. They will be able to live like proper human beings" (63). These highlight the stereotypical beliefs of the Britishers that the natives are savages, not proper human beings, thus, they are needed to be taken care of.

The colonised subjects are encouraged to mimic the coloniser as mimicry is often considered as the overt goal of colonial discourse. As a consequence, the colonised subjects mimic the coloniser by adopting the coloniser's culture, values, language etc. In *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*, the British officers tend to encourage Thengphakri to mimic their culture and values and even Thengphakri herself has the mimicking tendency. Hardy Sahib himself has taught her to ride a horse and use a gun. She rode horse, wore hat and worked shoulder to shoulder with the British officers. The following lines from the novel indicate this: "When she couldn't pronounce saddle properly, he had made her say the word twenty times.

Each and every thing was clearly imprinted in her mind and she vowed that she would become an expert horse-rider one day. She would be able to ride the horse, and say 'saddle' properly" (6). These clearly forecast how Thengphakhri was determined to follow her master's instructions and his language, the word 'vowed' indicates that riding horse and learning English language became a challenge for Thengphakhri which is nothing but her desire to imitate the ways and language of the Whites.

But the result of such mimicking is never a simple representation or reproduction of those mimicked traits, rather the result is blurred copy of the colonisers that can be quite threatening to the colonisers as it produces a hybridised class of people. For instance, Thengphakhri wore a hat, rode a horse, and used a gun but the novelist has predominantly referred to her traditional dress 'dokhona' and her knee-length black hair which symbolise hybridity. Although Thengphakhri was one of the members of the British Company and followed their ways, yet, she was something different and not exactly or totally like them. Elizabeth, the wife of Captain Hardy was amused to see Thengphkhri and thought that she was stunning. Most of the people and the white men were mesmerized by Thengphakhri. Thengphakhri's hair is unlike the white women's hair which holds the attention of many and especially Elizabeth's, who most often observes Thengphakhri closely, touches her hair and thinks if it is real, her hair is the symbol of power and strength which was used once by Hardy to pull her up when she fell to the ground while learning horse-ride. Thengphakhri is the embodiment of that hybridised class of people who stands as colonial resistance and arouses a sense of fear, wonder and ambivalence among the colonisers. Thus, mimicry creates hybridity and ambivalence which help in reversing the colonial discourse and writing back to the empire in a new and different way.

Looking further into the relationship of Captain Hardy and Thengphakhri we can relate Captain Hardy with Lord Macaulay, just as Lord Macaulay wanted to create a class of interpreters between them and the natives- "a class of persons

Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay 8), similarly, Captain Hardy wanted to employ Thengphakhri for the same purpose. The lines from the novel spoken by Captain Hardy justify this: "Thengphakhri, you must help us. You must help us! You will be one of our members" (16). Through this we can understand how the colonisers aimed in reproducing the colonised people like them, their very desire was that the natives accept and internalise the forms and habits of the colonial master which will establish their supremacy.

Though, Thengphakhri imitates or mimics the British officers, she has an ambivalent attitude towards them. Ambivalence generally refers to a state of being in between and within the postcolonial context; it is seen as the characteristic predicament of the colonized subject's double attitude of both attraction and repulsion towards the coloniser. She worked and collected taxes for the British and she always followed the British officers' orders but she was never clear about her feelings or attitude towards the British, because when Macklinson asked her whether she liked working with them, she remained silent but just smiled. She almost remained silent right from the beginning of the text but after her uncle Musahari's death, she was in a trauma: "She remained completely silent. It seemed as though something was happening. Some kind of conflict. A conflict-about which she couldn't open her mouth at all in front of anyone and just because she couldn't articulate it her heart was being torn into pieces" (63).

Turmoil was going on inside her and hence her attitude towards the British became more complex and ambivalent. She remembers about her uncle and his voice haunts her and keeps on stabbing at her. She heard her uncle's voice saying: "This land of yours, Thengphakri. Smear this soil on your head. In this soil, our forefathers' blood and bones are mixed! Don't let the boots of the Britishers fall on this soil. Thengphakri, take this soil and smear it on your forehead!" (64).

Tribhubon Bahadur, grandfather of Thengphakhri is one of the characters who worked

with the Britishers for several years and he had faith upon the British rulers and their administration who considers himself as their citizen, but we can see that towards the end of the novel his attitudes towards the British began to change. After the death of Musahari a sense of doubt emerged in him against the British Company.

Goswami has arranged the plot in a strategic manner and used various characters to show the plight of the colonised people and their steps towards rebellion. The novel reflects the gradual changes of the protagonist. We can see that Thengphakhri was a loyal servant of the British Company at the initial stage and she eagerly accepted each and every order given to her by Captain Hardy and Macklinson Sahib. The poor villagers also followed the British rules and instructions, they paid all kinds of taxes and many joined the British regiments as soldiers but as the story proceeds we can perceive the natives being ambivalent towards the Britishers and the wheel of revolutionary movements spinning gradually day by day.

The novel portrays different and opposing attitudes towards the colonisers, in the beginning when British came to rule the people of Bijni they thought that the Britishers came to save them from the Bhutanese invasion and other such foreign influences. They could not recognise that the same protectors would turn into destroyers. The Britishers began to spread education and transmitted their cultural, social, moral and religious ways to the colonised natives which ultimately indicate that the colonisers claim themselves as superior, rational, modern and civilised. Thus, the process of governance started and in trying to create a replica out of the natives the reversal is achieved. So, this fractured identity of the colonised subject serves to be a mode of colonial resistance which shows the failure of the colonial power to effectively reproduce and widen or empower itself.

There are people in the novel like Musahari, Khorgeshwor, Prince Ramchondro and many young boys who turned into rebels. Even the Queen of Bijni and her loyal servants who supported the company

earlier became ambivalent and lost hope in the British rule.

Thus, a split occurs which arouses fear among the colonisers. This split or fissure tends to create hybridity which resembles neither the 'one' nor the 'other'. This stage or position of hybridity creates a space where the suppressed colonial voices are unleashed. Bhabha in his essay "Signs Taken For Wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817" remarks as: "Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority- its rules of recognition" (Bhabha 114). Thus, hybridity serves as a medium of colonial resistance which helps in subverting the colonial discourse and the western narrative. By including the forgotten legendary heroine in the literary world and creating a different type of character using silence as her weapon Goswami has questioned the dominant narrative where mostly women are seen as oppressed and she is able to reveal the concealed and hidden narrative of the colonised people. In addition to that, she has successfully unmasked the plight of the poor peasants.

Moreover, by using various native words and referring to Bodo and Assamese traditional cultural practices Goswami has enabled to hybridise the literary work and contaminate the colonial language and their practices. For instance, jumai-jou (traditional beer), asanmuthi (bangle), bodo dokhona (bodo dress worn by women) and fami (lotus) are bodo words. Even the colonizers learned the native languages through which they tried to win the trust of the colonised people and prove themselves as their saviour and master, the sentence spoken by Macklinson Sahib indicates this: "Eibur beya thai, these places aren't safe!" (13). Whereas, Thengphakhri's inability to utter various English words inspite of being taught by Hardy several times degrades the superiority of the coloniser's language which symbolises her unwillingness to assimilate with them and that reflects the failure on the part of the

colonisers to extend itself. Hardy repeatedly tries to proclaim his superiority by imparting his language, but Thengphakhri fails to pronounce appropriately even after various eager attempts.

The novelist has also represented the traditional culture in various ways; one such attempt is through the character portrayal of Khorgeshwor Sutradhar who performs in traditional one act plays and once performed as the Sutradhar (prompter) of the play the *Abduction of Rukmini* written by Sri Sankardeva as mentioned in the novel. Thus, by narrating such cultural practices and the lives of the common people of Assam besides portraying the colonial oppression Indira Goswami is able to revisit and reclaim the historical past of the Assamese people, especially, the undermined and lesser known Bodo people.

Mimicry, ambivalence and hybridity are inter related and according to Bhabha "the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (Bhabha 86). Therefore, Indira Goswami's *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* is a novel where mimicry, ambivalence and hybridity interplay together and these establish the differences between the colonisers and the colonised and highlight the lack or failure of the colonisers to internalise and control the natives for which the colonisers slowly had to bring more and more soldiers and rely on weapons which indicate their fear of the natives. Macklinson's return to his homeland symbolises the colonisers' defeat and the approach of India's freedom. Hence, mimicry, ambivalence and hybridity function as tools of colonial resistance.

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