



Jonmoni D. Shira: Women, Christianity and Matrilineal tradition

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Abstract :

Jonmoni D. Shira, a popular poet among the Garos, traces women's oppression that plagued her generation and others before her in her poem "I, the Woman". Born after the advent of Christianity, Jonmoni is deeply entrenched in Christian doctrine. Jonmoni's situation of writing from within a matrilineal conditioning raises the question of how much Garo traditional matrilineal society was affected by the conversion project brought by the Christian missionaries. By the inclusion of "the" in the title, it is also indicative that the poem is meant to be read as the voice of all subjugated Garo women who had no means of voicing out their troubles. For Jonmoni, to be born as a woman is to be destined to misery. It is an unalterable fate that cannot be escaped. Her words echo the idea of biology as destiny that forms the foundation of gender relations in her society. This structural constraint implies women's marginal identity, her lack of means for negotiation and resistance. Jonmoni's motive in saying that she could not even propose to travel suggests the dangers and the inability of the women in her group to navigate the social space dominated by men. It also portrays women's inability to set goals or make choices. Lack of agency limits women's freedom and hampers empowerment. Jonmoni's poetry expresses this incapacitation of women through silencing. Silencing dislocates a woman's subjectivity in discursive practices as her experiences and voice are excluded. As she speaks as a colonized subject, her depiction of women's condition cannot be severed from the religious transformations that took place in her society. Therefore, what she portrays in the poem is the aftermath of religious conversion that has intensified the gender disparity practiced in her society.

Keywords : *Matrilineal, Garo, Feminist, Religion.*

Introduction :

Situated about twenty-eight kilometres from the first Garo church established in 1867 by Dr. Miles Bronson in Rajasimla, North Garo Hills, Jonmoni D. Shira's village Nishangram became the epicentre

of missionary activities after Rajasimla. By 1914, when Jonmoni D. Shira was born, Christian missionaries had already converted a major chunk of the Garo population. Dr. I.J. Stoddard, the first American Baptist Missionary to the Garos reached



Goalpara in 1867. But, four years before his arrival, Omed and Ramke Momin, the first Garo Christian converts were baptized in 1863(Carey 79). They were beneficiaries of the government school established by Captain Jenkins in 1843 at Goalpara. Their conversion came as a successful target in the establishment of the school, as the motive behind including Garo boys had been to impart western education and expand their missionary field. Jonmoni D.Shira was born forty decades later after the first conversion among the Garos took place. By then, missionaries had widened their field into the mountains of the present Garo Hills and numerous schools had already been established. Leaving behind tradition and orality, many Garos embraced Christianity and writing became a new cultural phenomena replacing the age old oral tradition of the tribe.

Born in 1914 in Nishangram in the North Garo Hills area, Jonmoni D.Shira was the fifth of the six children by her parents. Even though they were of modest means, her parents were interested in their children's education and enrolled them in schools. Jonmoni was the first girl from her village to pass from the Middle School. She passed her matriculation from Welsh Mission High School in Shillong in 1934(Marak). Jonmoni D.Shira was supported and sponsored by Miss Earn M.Rold, an American Baptist Missionary, in her Higher Secondary studies, then known as Intermediate of Arts, in Cotton College, Guwahati. Due to lack of financial resources, her relatives proposed to send her to Golaghat to teach in a mission school. But, another missionary, Miss Randall promised to sponsor her with books and fees if someone else stepped up to pay for the extra necessities.

Her relatives came to help Jonmoni and thereafter, she got another opportunity to pursue her graduation course in Cotton college.

Jonmoni became a part of the first group of Garo educated youths who were distantly severed from tradition and deeply rooted in Christianity. From her various associations like studying in Welsh Mission school or from her benefactors, Earn Rold and Miss Randall, it can be easily deduced that Christianity had a deep hold on Jonmoni. She became the voice of Garo women at a time when Garo men like Howard Denison W. Momin and Evelyn R. Marak, who were both poets in their own rights, dominated the literary circle. Most of Jonmoni's poems like "*Do.kru*"(Dove), "*Daisy*", "*Basako*" (When), "*Miksongani*" (Aim), "*Mikjumang A.gilsak*"(The World,a Nightmare) were published in the journal *A.chik Kurang* or "The Voice of the Garos", where her contemporaries also published their writings. Her poems that appear in the journal are patriotic in their theme or serves as an awakening call to other Garos to strive for wisdom. Caroline R.Marak classifies Jonmoni D. Shira as a 'New poet', a term she gives to a group of early twentieth century educated poets among the Garos(Marak). Deeply influenced by Christianity, these poets relied on themes of nativity, fall and redemption of mankind as the popular source of material for their poetry.

This paper tries to analyse Jonmoni D.Shira's poem "I, the Woman" as an attempt by the poet to depict the subordinate status of women. The poem was written to portray the oppression faced by women during Jonmoni's time and generations before her. For convenience, Caroline



R. Marak's translation of the poem in English will be used for analysis. Jonmoni's situation of writing from within a matrilineal conditioning raises the question of how much Garo traditional matrilineal society was affected by the conversion project brought by the Christian missionaries.

One of Jonmoni's most acknowledged poem is "*Anga Me.chik*" which has been translated by Caroline R. Marak as "I, the Woman". Jonmoni's "I, the Woman" is a poem through which she means to portray the condition of the womenfolk of the Garo tribe. "I, the Woman" can be read as Jonmoni's own voice against oppression and by the inclusion of "the" in the title, it is also indicative that the poem is meant to be read as the voice of all subjugated Garo women who had no means of voicing out their troubles. Here, Jonmoni as a woman voices out the injustices seemingly suffered by women even in a matrilineal society. She opens the poem with the lines:

"I am born a woman
To bear all kinds of woes,
Though I lament my misfortune
I cannot alter it". (Marak 118)

For Jonmoni, to be born as a woman is to be destined to misery. It is an unalterable fate that cannot be escaped. Her words echo the idea of biology as destiny that forms the foundation of gender relations in her society.

Her allusion to the biblical myth of 'original sin' indicates the influence of Christianity that greatly affected her and her society:

"Poor Eve committed a sin
Before the beginning of the world,
Bringing heavier burdens and anguish
Upon the woman". (Marak 118)

What follows from the myth of 'original sin' are the various interpretations that become essential to Christianity in its views on women. Right from Adam, who blamed Eve for having enticed him to eat the forbidden fruit, there originated a continuous blame upon the woman for having brought humankind's downfall. This notion of women as the harbinger of mankind's downfall spread along with colonialism and its project of conversion. The myth of the 'original sin' was also used by patriarchy as a tool in subjugating women. It imposed upon women the rites of repentance that could be completed by a lifelong servitude for the wrong she had done. The social and personal changes that conversion brought to the Garos are manifested in Jonmoni's words which reflect the acceptance of Christianity's view on women.

Although many considered Christianization as being favorable towards women's status in colonial India, it was seen that there was "a tendency toward a restrictive form of femininity" (Kent 9). This restriction upon women by Christianity came as a result of glorification in women's purity and its associations with 'respectability'. But, gender roles and women's subjugation were not simply and easily imposed upon the colonized subjects. Rather, there were various tactics of coercion, appropriation and collusion that went into the making of the colonized subjects. In many instances of conversion, women's subjugation was just a continuation and extension of the already existing patriarchal operations in the society.

Considering her birth within a matrilineal tradition where the birth of a girl child is celebrated,



Jonmoni's lament on being born a woman may appear deceitful or inaccurate. But, by focusing on her position as a woman speaking from within a matrilineal culture that has been greatly transformed by Christianity throws light upon the fact that the patriarchal elements in the religion of the west had infiltrated the structural gender relations in Garo society. Jonmoni further explores the intensification of gender segregation that is played out in converted households:

"From birth, her strength is limited
Her face is lovely,
But she is taught
To be under the male domination".

(Marak 118)

In the above lines, she also highlights how women's subordinate position is accomplished, i.e. by being taught what to do.

It might be asked how women's status in tradition differed from that of the new society converted to Christianity. To understand the workings of power in the Garo matrilineal system, a clearer picture of gender relations in traditional Garo society needs to be examined. It is written in *Some Culture of the Garos* and *Lost Garo Lands* by Mihir sangma, *Garo History Part I and II* by Jobang D. Marak, and *Bonepani Nokpante* by Simison Sangma, that matriliney and matrilocal residence was a strategic inception by the Garos to trace descent and lineage of the children in case of the father's death, which was frequent due to constant warfare with the neighbouring tribes. Mihir N Sangma writes in *Some culture of the Garos* (*A.chikrangni Mitam Dakbewalrang*) that people gathered in the Nokpante(men's hut) of

Bonepa and decided that daughters should stay home and their husbands should instead relocate to the wife's house. The youngest daughter, or any daughter the parents preferred, should instead inherit the property. The nephew of the girl's father would be chosen as husband for the girl. The Nokmaship(chieftain) would be acceded by the son-in-law (Sangma, 2010, p.31)(translation mine). Simison Sangma and Jobang D. Marak also writes similarly in their respective books. This rule was however, not mandatory in all scenarios. Men and women could still choose their own spouse as long as they belonged to separate clans.

The marriage system among the Garos require clan exogamy, but allows matrilateral cross cousin marriage. The matrilateral cross-cousin marriage grants that the prospective husband for a girl would be her maternal uncle's son or her father's nephew. In cases of cross-cousin marriages, it implied that matrilineal descent groups both require it's male and female members, phrased as 'interdependence of brother and sister'(Schneider 11). The brother depends upon the sister 'for the perpetuation of his descent line and the provision of an heir'(Schneider 11). This enables the brother, whether elder or younger, to ascertain rights over his sister and her sexuality, as it is through her that his lineage would be secured. Thus, men assume the role of the protector, caretaker, manager and authority over his sister and his maternal house too. Jonmoni is very vocal about the plight of Garo women who have to tolerate even younger male figure in the lines :



“From tender age
I have to live under man’s control,
At the slap of my younger brother
I weep loudly”.(Marak 118)

On a surface level, matrilineal residence obliges the ‘exchange of men’ as the man relocates to his wife’s house. But, rather than an ‘exchange of men’, it becomes a tactical exchange of property and women among men, as the succession is from male to male. If the wife is the daughter of a *Nokma*(chief), the chieftainship is normally passed on to the son-in-law. This chain of ‘exchange of men’ facilitates a cycle of male domination of one clan over the property and ownership of another clan. Women are hence, only regarded as custodians of property: “Women are dispossessed in their own homes by being reduced to ‘custodians’ of ‘tradition/culture/family honour and the accompanying baggage’”(Jain 74). Custodianship in reality consists of no real power, authority or agency and ‘domesticity is believed to consist of its own rewards’(Jain 74). Similar to this idea, Simone de Beauvoir stated in *The Second Sex* that if a woman were an inheritor(either of her mother’s property or her father’s), “she would to an excessive degree transmit the wealth of her father’s family to that of her husband; so she is carefully excluded from the succession. But inversely, because she owns nothing, woman does not enjoy the dignity of being a person; she herself forms a part of the patrimony of a man: first of her father, then of her husband”(106).

Within the Garo matrilineal system, through male affines already organized prior to marriage, there would emerge ‘a coalition of in-marrying

managers acting on behalf of the descent group or their wives’(Schneider 28). Therefore ‘the joint activity of the descent group is the management of the joint activity of another descent group’(Schneider 28-29). The authoritative role of male members are henceforth transferred from male to male of the same clan whose relationship is that of an uncle and nephew before the marriage and later, father-in-law and son-in-law after the marriage. The male to male succession also indicates that positions of highest authority even within the matrilineal descent group is ordinarily vested in statuses occupied by men. However, even within this form of traditional system, it could still be noted that women would not have to fear about being displaced after marriage.

Jonmoni also portrays women’s lack of agency in her society in the lines :

“I cannot act as I please,
There’s not a day of happiness for me;
I cannot dream of Even proposing to travel”.
(Marak 118-119)

Women’s agency implies freedom in movement, ability to make choices, set goals and express opinions. Agency also implies women’s ability to move and participate in the public sphere. Other forms of agency manifests in “bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis”(Kabeer 438). Kabeer stated in “Three faces of agency in feminist economics: capabilities, empowerment and citizenship” that “The concept of human agency is central to a feminist analysis of livelihoods for two reasons. First, it is central



to the analysis of social inequality because it draws attention to the ways in which structural constraints shape the distribution of livelihood options available to differently positioned groups of men and women. And second, it is central to the social justice agenda because it is the human capacity for agency that drives the processes of structural transformation". Jonmoni shows that even in matrilineal societies, there is apparent curbing of women's agency which keeps her subordinated by limiting her space to that of the home and the garden without any real authoritative power. Women's activities are hence curtailed to reproduction in the family which is shown in the lines:

"Now I am a married woman,
My problems have multiplied;
It is now my duty
To suffer agony in bearing children".
(Marak 119)

Women's participation in production also takes place within the assigned spheres of the home and the field :

"In the early hours of the morning
I get up and cook
I spend the whole day
in the field.
I return home carrying a load
And then work at home". (Marak 120)

This structural constraint implies women's marginal identity, her lack of means for negotiation and resistance. Jonmoni's motive in saying that she could not even propose to travel suggests the dangers and the inability of the women in her group to navigate the social space dominated by men. It also portrays women's inability to set goals or

make choices. Lack of agency limits women's freedom and hampers empowerment.

Lack of agency also relatively signals lack of voice and resistance. Kate Millet opines in *Sexual Politics*(2000) that in their attempt towards a pseudoscientific unification of the cultural definition of masculinity and femininity with the genetic reality of male and female, psychoanalysts through the usage of jargon like "passivity", "low libido", "masochism", "narcissism", "undeveloped super ego", gave a new respectability to old myth of feminine "nature". By assigning such essentialist attributes to the woman, it could now be "said scientifically that women are inherently subservient, and males dominant, more strongly sexed and therefore entitled to sexually subjugate the female, who enjoys her oppression and deserves it, for she is by her very nature vain, stupid, and hardly better than barbarian, if she is human at all"(Millet 203). Jonmoni portrays this essentializing of women as stupid by nature :

"Yet I cannot
So much as open my mouth,
Fearing the retort,
Silence, you stupid woman!".(Marak 119)

The silencing of women as being stupid and unintelligent has always been a patriarchal manoeuvre to subdue women. It has been observed that "being silenced in one's own account of one's life is a kind of amputation that signals oppression" (Lugones and Spelman 19). Similarly, Meyers opines that "Silencing disables agency, for the alternative to articulating your own experience and your own goals in your own way is to live someone else's version of you—to inhabit their definition of



what you are like and their construal of what you think, feel, and want and consequently to find yourself enacting their story of how your life should go” (Meyers Chapter 1). Jonmoni’s poetry expresses this incapacitation of women through silencing. Silencing dislocates a woman’s subjectivity in discursive practices as her experiences and voice are excluded. Jonmoni as an educated woman expresses her desire to “open my mouth” but is silenced. Her disillusionment arises because she possesses knowledge and ideas but isn’t allowed to share and speak as she is a woman.

Jonmoni’s brutal attack upon men of her society ends in a severe denunciation, warning them of the fires of hell:

“You shall not always remain superior;
As a reward for your deeds
You will have no escape from hell.
You, men, therefore,
Beware....”. (Marak 120)

Jonmoni’s act of disparagement against men in her society is facilitated by western education. She is able to reap the benefits of the western education system and use it as a soapbox to step on to and reject certain forms of visible oppression and to declare judgement upon menfolk. Her denouncement of the menfolk stems from traditional as well as religious perspective, and both seem to offer an oppressive picture. Yet, it is noteworthy that as she speaks as a colonized subject, her depiction of women’s condition cannot be severed from the religious

transformations that took place in her society. Therefore, what she portrays in the poem is the aftermath of religious conversion that has intensified the gender disparity practiced in her society. Her experiences as a woman takes place within a rigidified gender structure.

The hierarchical gender structure that she portrays is the result of Christianity’s patriarchal impact upon her society. Although traditional practices showed unequal gender relations in the form of transfer of power from one man to another, Christianity added to the subjugated status of women by assigning them the role of *femme fatale* or as the harbinger of death and downfall upon the human race, hence the silencing of women as ‘stupid’. Situating her position as a follower of Christianity, Jonmoni’s passive acceptance of women’s subordinate position can be considered the point where tradition and Christianity converges or meets. Christianity assigns essentialism to the genders. Traditional roles put women as subordinate in the material world whereas Christianity gives birth or assigns a reality to the core of gender. The Christian idea of women as *femme fatale* is absent in traditional culture and it plays a crucial role in women’s oppression in Garo society. The Christian idea that assigns a core to women further marginalizes them in the gender scale and acts as another stumbling block in the liberation of women, for liberation would firstly now require shaking off of the gender core assigned by Christianity.



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