

## **The Conspiracy of Silence in Mamoni Raisom Goswami's the Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar**

Tejoswita Saikia

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, D.K.D College, Dergaon Golaghat, Assam, India

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**Abstract:** *Western epistemology has handed down a knowledge system based on hegemony and binaries. The South Asian region had been destabilized by this knowledge system during its colonial days. Internalization of the foreign knowledge and value system has led to an apparent unmaking of the history and culture of the colonized nations. A kind of amnesia has taken over obliterating the past narratives and superimposing on them the discourse of Orientalism as constructed by the colonizers. In the midst of the complex interplay of memory and amnesia silence plays a very significant role. In the dominant discourse, silence has always been seen as the binary opposite of voice and agency; silence is made to be an appendage of oppression, but what needs close scrutiny is the role of silence as something that is powerful, rebellious and transformative. Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* is a novel that allows the exploration of silence from different perspectives. The novel highlights the silencing of the subaltern history by the dominant narrative through the fictionalized retelling of Thengphakhri, the first woman tehsildar of India. On the other hand, Thengphakhri's silence is filled with ambiguity and possibilities. It allots a space for maneuverability of her psyche in the midst of the inner turmoil that she tries to resolve. Silence, here, becomes a prism through which to examine the issues of history, gender and colonialism.*

*It is these issues of forgetting, rewriting and challenging – all through silence, in the postcolonial context that is sought to be explored in this paper with special reference to Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*.*

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The South Asian geopolitical cluster cannot be deliberated upon without an intricate delineation of the colonial phenomenon. Even today, when we believe ourselves to have crossed over to the 'post-colonial' era, an absolute and complete break away from our past of colonization is infeasible as the colonial experience will remain a catalyst to the formation of every inch of the region's future. The colonial discourse that had been imposed upon the colonized subjects causing them to suffer from a cultural amnesia draws from the hegemony of western knowledge system which is based on a very deceptive yet burly framework of binaries. One of the most important yet apparently antithetical relationships to have emerged from this system of binaries is that of voice and silence. If in the patriarchal hegemony of the colonizers voice has always been the medium of agency, the productivity of meditative silence has carelessly and with condescension been disregarded. To recuperate from our cultural amnesia and reclaim our socio-cultural life we must step back from viewing postcoloniality as a linear and historical event and recognize it as the space wherefrom we can offer an oppositional subjectivity which incorporates the possibilities of multiple narratives and discourses. In employing a postcolonial rhetoric we must be cautious of what Spivak refers to as exploited lands whose rich cultural heritage is waiting to be recovered so that we do not reproduce the 'axioms of imperialism' (Spivak, pp. 243, [http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343469?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343469?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)). This note of caution warns us against being overwhelmed by the linear metanarrative of history that makes postcoloniality an appendage to the colonial phenomenon rather than allowing its existence as an alternative system of existence. Thus, to establish the alternative postcolonial narratives articulation of a novel rhetoric is critical for we know that the "master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

The debunking and subverting of the schematic bipolarity between voice as agency and silence as oppression will destabilize the foundational rhetoric that continues to perpetuate the colonizer's predisposition in us. In such a way has our psyche been subjugated that our resistance too echoes the language of the colonizers. Along with our native cultures our native knowledge systems and languages too have been sought to be obliterated and with such force the colonizers' ideologies been imposed that our own past has receded into a dark crevice of our collective memory causing a kind of amnesia. Breaking down of the hierarchical epistemic framework and bringing out of the tensions and contradictions inherent in the colonial discourse by reaching into our buried memories of an alternate way of being will aid the formulation of a radical resistance that opens up space for multiple and varied narratives. It is, as such, clear that the specificity of two dissimilar cultures has created a diversion between the ways we understand the concept of silence and voice in relation to the ideas of oppression and empowerment. It must be our attempt to visit the little and obscure places of in-betweenness that

resides between silence and voice. Throughout our colonial experience the binaries, whether of gender or of agency and oppression, imposed have coalesced and dovetailed to mutate into different forms of resistance which has however been buried by the metanarrative of linearity and hierarchy.

Where voices were being muted silence became a way to preserve and pass on stories. Transforming itself into an alternative story-telling medium, silence became its own agency to hand down a form of resistance that the colonizers could neither comprehend nor challenge. Such is the silence of Thengphakhri and the silence that pervades the novel *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* by Mamoni Raisom Goswami. Silence and oppression has always been associated with the colonial subject and women. Thengphakhri in this novel is a representation of both but in a skewed manner. She is not devoid of 'agency' and is rather empowered by the colonial masters themselves. The novel is a fictionalized biography of the real life persona of Thengphakhri, a Bodo woman who was the first woman to become a tehsildar under the British rule. She was respected by the people, lauded by her colonial masters and lessoned in the 'masculine' activities of horse-riding and gun-firing. The perplexing deviance in this story of an unusually empowered colonized woman lies in her silence – a silence that is her actual agency, her space of being free and emancipated. Apart from the silence of Thengphakhri, the novel is ubiquitous with other silences of the colonized people that are in fact resounding with a lot of things.

Thengphakhri's identity as a woman, an identity that is marginal, is highlighted in the beginning of the novel where she is shown to be waiting for the steamer that might bring Captain Hardy back to her. The reader is anxious with questions of the relationship between this Bodo woman and the English colonizer. Even though it provokes us to define it as an amorous relationship we are faced with silences surrounding the relationship that strictly discourage any such branding. Her longing seems to be for one who she was very dearly fond of – someone who was her mentor and a figure worthy of great reverence. Beyond that we are told nothing the truth, if any, residing solely within Thengphakhri. Her silence regarding Captain Hardy does not allow anyone to judge her as having a carnal weakness for the white colonizer thus keeping the power intact in her hands and defying the conventional rhetoric of the native woman falling for the white masculine master. Even if hers was an amorous affection her silence gives her the sole power to react on it. Thengphakhri's womanhood is foregrounded by the description of her beauty and especially of her long, black hair. Hair that is longer and more beautiful than the other women in the village lend Thengphakhri a femininity that anticipates a docile, subservient character 'conventionally' (what is convention is a conjecture) expected of a woman. But the hat on the top of her head of long, black hair represents empowerment that is men's monopolized dominion. Silence, here, again becomes a confounding phenomenon because a woman of beauty whose 'traditional' role is to be silent is looked upon with curiosity and a sense of dejection by the fellow villagers because of her silence. A possessor of such extraordinary power yet she defies the logic agency accorded by verbosity and broods in silence leaving all others helpless at knowing what she thinks about. Thengphakhri is what she imagines the river to be – draped in red, the colour of blood, the colour of life, the river pregnant with unknown possibilities will reveal herself only when the shining sun of the British empire tussles with wind like freedom of her native land.

The bilingual situation of a colony complicates binary relationship between silence and voice because speaking in the language of the colonizer inevitably silences the native language and its own system of meanings and nuances. This is exhibited in how Macklinson talks to Thengphakhri about the flora and fauna of her village as if introducing her to a foreign land. The colonizer's overtake was complete as he had learnt the language of the natives thus gaining a control over them through their language too and hence could make the people including Thengphakhri believe that they would save the land from the native's own destructive self. The colonizer found power and agency in his verbosity. But Thengphakhri's curious 'inability' to learn the master's language deflates the authority of the colonizer's language as it symbolized her refusal to be assimilated and her refusal to fall into an aphasic silence. Verbosity for Macklinson is an agent of power and so he cautions Thengphakhri to not be softhearted in her duty as a tehsildar when he sees her remaining silent as the tax defaulters are being disciplined. Thengphakhri's silence again warns of being subversive because it is an active and contemplative silence; a silence that accords her the space to maneuver through the complexities of her duty as a tehsildar and her duty towards her own people.

It is of immutable importance that we recognize Thengphakhri's empowerment not as something bestowed upon her by the British but as something inherent in her. Tribhuvan Bahadur, her grandfather, may seem to be the patriarchal figure who grants her with capabilities uncommon to women yet absolute faith in Thengphakhri's bravery being a Bodo woman and his complicity in her silence, because it is only he who hears the resonance of her silence, make him her accomplice rather than a benevolent patriarch. On the death of her maternal uncle when Tribhuvan Bahadur knows Thengphakhri's knowledge of the British involvement he leaves it to her to decide as to where she seeks to place her loyalty and strength. The emblematic bronze sword that Thengphakhri had found among the ruins of a barrack and that had belonged to a Goddess's temple indicated in an oracularly manner that she possessed immense power which again is proven when she intuitively shoots a leopard in its head saving two men. Amidst her impregnable silence Thengphakhri sometimes smiled secretly.

Her smile always came at a moment when she reflected upon her own power in a sense of astonishment. Hiding her face from the borkandazes she smiled remembering a riding incident with Captain Hardy. As she fell off the horse and Captain Hardy pulled her up holding her long hair; holding a woman's hair represents the brute power of a man over a woman. But the innocuous smile is suggestive of the subversion of that power of the white masters in the hands of a woman who had been armoured by the masters themselves.

The novel is ambiguous in its portrayal of the British Raj in India. This, perhaps, serves the purpose of accommodating multiple narratives beyond the restrictive scheme of binary oppositions. Thengphakhri and her grandfather had always been loyal to the British masters without being unjust to the fellow natives. Having heard about the qualities of the white men from her grandfather she had never really been inimical towards these foreign men. The British officers' campaign against the inhuman practice of sati had portrayed them as saviours and upholders of the rights of women among many Indians. Their liberal ways of life and scientific advancement placed them at a revered position of superiority. On the contrary, an odious silence surrounded the mysterious women hanging around the barracks, who undoubtedly had been brought to provide sexual pleasures to the officers in exchange for favours as well as around the mysterious deaths of the rebels in the supposed attacks by wild elephants. Thengphakhri's insurgent maternal uncle Musahari too had died in a similar incident. The death of her maternal uncle, the inhuman methods of tax collection, the air of rebellion blowing against the exploitative regime of the colonizers suffocated Thengphakhri with an unbearably loud silence and she finally decided to speak for once asking Macklinson about the truth of her uncle's death. However, Macklinson's silence on this reinforces the colonial discourse of the civilizing mission while smothering the truth of exploitation.

At one time Thengphakhri remembers how her maternal uncle had insinuated that the Goddess Shakti had gifted her with the bronze sword to protect her land from the marauders but her voice again resounds with grief at the news of Macklinson leaving too like Captain Hardy. Eventually, it ominously becomes clear that her loyalty to them has to be sacrificed for her motherland just as sacrifices are made at the Goddess's altar. Thengphakhri's silence at this point is convulsing with her inner turmoil and casts a dark cloud over the entire situation ready to burst into torrential rains of destruction. A portentous silence overcasts the meeting between the Queen of Bijni, Macklinson and Thengphakhri too. Amidst the queen's applauding of Thengphakhri's role as a tehsildar what remains unsaid yet resonates with tremendous vibrations is the queen's imploring Thengphakhri cross over to the other side wherefrom she can exact justice for the oppressed native people than be an accessory to the colonial machinery. The insurgent activities in the novel take place only at the background and it is through murmurs and whispers that we are warned of the impending storm. The stillness of it all where active movement is replaced passive rumours is even more daunting. These murmurs and whispers are reflective of the resistance offered within a space that is in-between voice and silence. The natives recognize their exploitation and are stealthily planning an overthrow, thus securing their power within the garb of silent acceptance.

Macklinson and Nakken Clak's deceptively making Thengphakhri an accessory to the capture of the rebel leader Prince Ramchandra for once shifted the power of silence to the hands of the oppressors yet the verbose defense of the British by Tribhuvan Bahadur had always been a veil protecting the unknown yet simmering heat of rebellion within himself and Thengphakhri. The realization of having been made a collaborator and instrument of oppression of her own people had broken the noise of inner tussle and the silent vow of revolt echoed through her empowered being. The bronze sword that had remained a passive object now would reverberate with the cries of the oppressors' fear.

Silence in the novel allows a movement, a maneuverability of Thengphakhri's psyche as well as provides her freedom from having to react giving her time to reflect upon things. On the death of her maternal uncle, her silence also enables healing while she continuously tries to negotiate between her duty and reverence for the empire and her torment over the oppression of her fellow natives. With time and as the action moves forward her silence is one of gestation. Thengphakhri's power and power combine to become an empowering silence that holds within itself the seeds of rebellion. Even for the natives, throughout the novel, their silence is menacing because the British officers do not know if it is one of fear or of resistance. This space of possibilities empowers the natives allowing them plot, dodge and hide from the colonizers. In *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* the meaning of silence constantly shifts and as such manifests the plausibility of a dimension where multiple narratives and discourses coexist and intersect each other. It also defies the linearity of postcolonialism emphasizing it as a spatial phenomenon than a temporal event. The colonial experience of the people in the novel moulded their psyche so as to be able to articulate an alternative discourse breaking the rigid foundation of binary opposition. Thengphakhri has, thus, not only challenged but broken the stereotypes and hegemonic antitheses imposed by the colonial discourse as she became a site where the British as both torchbearers as well as inhuman oppressors tussle with each other and an agent who reveals silence as empowering. Silence, unrestricted by words exercises a fluidity which allows a constant transition and

transmutability, thus allowing multiplicity unlike the Western hegemonic knowledge system that straitjackets narratives into polar opposites.

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