Negotiation of the Female 'Self' in Domestic Space : An Analysis of Bhabendra Nath Saikia's *The Hour before Dawn*

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Abstract:

The relationship between men and women always has been mutual and interdependent; yet, men have always subjugated women in every space, be it domestic or 'outer' space. Performing household activities or duties and rearing children, women play a prime role in a family, and create a space of their own in which they dwell meditatively. As a result, domestic space emerges as a primary concern for women in their lives. The aim of this paper is to analyse how the process of negotiation and passive resistance work hand in hand and function as complementary to each other, how female 'self' is constructed through the process of women's negotiation with domestic space, how women initiate negotiation with their concerned domestic space through the enforcement of passive resistance, and how women resort to passive resistance on account of negotiation with their concerned domestic space in the light of the novel *The Hour before Dawn*.

Keywords: Co-existence; Domestic Space; Negotiation; Passive Resistance; 'Self'.

There is no doubt that the patriarchal system has placed women in subjugation to men. Men have always occupied the position above women in the hierarchical system of the patriarchal society. As a result, men have been vested with decision-making power in a household or family, and women mere have turned into an object by paying allegiance as well as obedience to decisions initiated by men. Men have exercised their authority over women, ignoring the rights of women in a household, in the governance of a family and supressed the voices of women forcefully and deliberately. On the other hand, women have acknowledged the supremacy of men through their projection of subservient nature. This subservi-

ent nature and obedience of women towards men have strengthened the pillars of patriarchy to run its course through history. However, with the advent of modernisation, i.e., an era of enlightenment or emancipation, the rigid structure of patriarchal system tends to become loose due to resisting force invoked by women against this prevailing system; indeed, women have resorted to various means of resistance in order to escape from the bondages and clutches of the patriarchal system, as well as in order to seek liberty, relief, and happiness, especially in the domestic space of an androcentric family.

Women always emerge as a prime figure in a household or family because they engage themselves in looking after a family and various household works—starting from kitchen or domestic chores and rearing children to a household management. All the household activities are managed and regulated by them, whereas men focus on the earning and bring their earning home by engaging themselves in various tasks laid outside the boundary of a household. Thus, for women, domestic sphere turns out to be a primary concern, and transforms into a space in which women dwell meditatively and authoritatively. In this regard, Irene Cieraad in her article "Domestic Spaces" expresses, "Domestic space was interpreted not so much as the living space of a household but as a secluded domain in which women took care of children and the household, while men spend much time in public space earning a living and socialising with other men" (1).

The proximity of women to domestic space has been a socio-cultural phenomenon irrespective of any culture or geographical location, whereas men's association with domestic space has been relegated to such an extent that men's presence in domestic space has been a subject matter of negligence. Even to talk about domestic space in the context of Gerogian London, Benjamin Heller in his article emphasizes the fact that "Whilst women were closely linked with the home and housekeeping, the relative under-representation of men in historians' analyses of domestic space is problematic" (624). Domestic space, as we generally perceive, is understood in terms of its physicality or physical frame, which includes "the family and the physical structure of homes" (Avilez 136). In fact, the idea of domestic space centres around the house or home that serves "as a gendered spatial locus" (Pattison 225). When the material existence of the house or home transcends the boundary of physicality or physical location and enters into the spatial dimension, it turns into domestic space that "takes into account the material, psychological, spiritual, gendered, social, cultural, and the political aspects of house, home, and garden in the context of everyday and of human relationships within and beyond

the house" (3) and "also encompasses spaces beyond traditional ideas of home . . ." (Briganti and Mezei, 4). It is also very much apparent that an individual's close association with a particular space leaves a profound impact on his/her psyche and accelerates the process of bonding or intimacy between his /her psyche and the space concerned. Similarly, a woman's intimacy with the space of her household establishes a relation between domestic space and her psyche. Thus the idea of domestic space can not only be perceived in terms of only its physical manifestation: for women, it functions as a 'psychological construct or manifestation' that turns out to be an intimate as well as essential part and parcel of women's psyche and lives.

It cannot be denied that though women occupy a central position in domestic space, yet the patriarchal aggression has crippled them to a greater extent by robbing them of their natural freedom. Moreover, the resistance posed by them against the prevailing structure of patriarchal society tends to become passive rather than active. Their passive resistance resembles the concept or idea of non-cooperation, non-violence, or non-interference that Gandhi himself borrowed from Thoreau's essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience". Addressing the concept of resistance, Hollander and Einwohner focus on two central issues on which the position of resistance varies accordingly: the two central issues they mention in their article are "recognition" and "intent" (539).

The first question they pose is whether "recognition" is necessary for an act to be called resistance. The next question they put forward is whether a participant must be aware of his/her action operating as resistance against any authority. Some scholars believe that "recognition" is essential for an act to be regarded as resistance, whereas others think that "recognition" should not be prioritised because sometimes an 'everyday act', such as making false promises, ignoring authority, resorting to pretence, and so on, can function as a form of resistance. Similarly, "intent" behind an action exercised by a participant sometimes may not be apparent to the participant himself/herself or others. To answer these two questions, considering the opinions of different scholars, they have laid down numerous implications concerning the various positions on which resistance operates, because answers to these questions cannot be brought to a single solution, and as the nature as well as outcome of resistance is purely contingent upon an operational system on which the resistance concerned runs its course. However, in order to evade such pluralistic complications and for the sake of simplification of the concept of resistance, many intellectuals also have divided resistance into two broad categories on the basis of its degree: active and passive resistance. The term active denotes 'direct' or

'immediate' cause, whereas the term passive implies 'indirect' or 'non con-frontation'. The subtle difference between active and passive resistance lies in the essence of their operation in a system: if passive resistance oper-ates upon the notion of absence of consent, the nature of active resistance incorporates in it the principle of absence of consent along with the desire to 'challenge' or 'transgress the limit'. Here, the term active resistance im-plies the essence of confrontation with somebody with an authoritative hold or of challenging any authority with coercive force.

Considering Foucault's idea of resistance, Brent L. Pickett also expresses, "Although transgression is the (temporary) negation of a limit, it is not itself negative in character. . . . Through transgression it is possible to un-dermine these limits, although new ones will always arise" (450). In this context, transgression does not mean going beyond the boundary; here, it means the 'desire to confront' and 'materialise a dream'. There is no doubt that even passive resistance also involves opposition, but its presence of operation cannot be felt, and sometimes, if it is felt, does not invoke the feelings of threat to an authority that governs a system. Although move-ments such as non-cooperation or non-violence seem to bear the tone of passivity, they cannot be termed passive resistance. Even in those move-ments mentioned above, the presence as well as measures of resistance is apparent to the authority along with participants themselves, although the way of their operation negates the very idea of extremity. To speak about the ethics of passive resistance, J.G. James in his article remarks thus: " 'Resisters' are fanatics, wrong-headed, seekers for a 'cheap martyrdom,' and 'faddists,' yet the facts that for the most part they are law-abiding citizens, who have never appeared before the magistrates as defaulters or criminals, and that . . . entitle them to respectful consideration and at least serious attention" (281).

Passive resistance posed by women against the patriarchal dominance embeds in it the concept of negotiation. Negotiation is a process that demands co-existence with others; it is a sort of mutual agreement with present circumstances. The initiation of passive resistance invokes the process of negotiation to a greater extent that functions as a tacit essence in the implementation of passive resistance: since passive resistance en-tails the absence of violence and coercion, the negotiation with the pres-ent circumstances becomes the sole means of enforcing passive resistance. Mark A. Boyer and others, considering the view point of many eminent scholars, agree to the proposition as to the way women engage themselves in the negotiation process in various contexts, even though their primary focus lies on women's negotiation in international context: "Even across these wide-ranging venues [such as domestic setting, international con-

text, social relationship, et al.], [Many scholars] argue for similarities in the manner in which women approach negotiation, whether in crisis resolution or household management" (26). Moreover, with regard to the nature of women's approach to negotiation, they also acknowledge the fact that the negotiation process initiated by women through their "interdependent self-schemas" are "more oriented toward maintaining and protecting these relationships" that help women "define themselves in terms of their connection to others" (27). Although generally negotiation is seen as a means of conflict resolution, women's negotiation with domestic space involves a process of their adaptation to the concerned space they reside: their negotiation with the present circumstances that are integral to domestic space acts a strategy for survival as well as a shield against patriarchal injustice.

As for women, they constantly need to negotiate with the domestic space in order to wield passive resistance against the patriarchal authority. The approach to negotiation adopted by women in the context of domestic sphere is determined by "either reason or emotion (or a mixture of both)" (Jagodzinska 73) and serves as "an art of self-management" (76). To illustrate the concept of negotiation, Bruce Fraser in his essay further mentions, "Negotiation is part of being alive, everyone is familiar with it and, like it or not, everyone engages in it daily" (22). Thus, it can be said that the relationship between negotiation and passive resistance has been always reciprocal. Since negotiation works on the principles of mutual understandings and co-existence, passive resistance also follows the pattern of mutual co-existence because passive resisters do not believe in the forceful elimination of their opposition.

The novel *The Hour Before Dawn* commences with the second marriage of Mohikanto—who is the husband of Menoka, the female protagonist—to Kiron. What saddens Menoka is that her husband, Mohikanto, is about to get into wedlock with another woman named Kiron, without even informing and consulting her. This incident of the second marriage of Mohikanto to Kiron infuriates Menoka and invokes in her a sense of hatred towards her husband. The reason for her anger is that her husband has planned to remarry without her consent, even ignoring her presence in the household. The severe abhorrence of Menoka towards her own husband and the mental agony caused by impending events after the second marriage of her husband direct her to take a step of resistance by not letting her husband touch her body. In this instance, her act of revulsion serves as a reciprocation of her husband's initiation of his second marriage. Even on the day of her husband's remarriage, Menoka questions herself whether her body no longer holds the power of attrac-

tion with the passing time: "In baring herself, had [she] emptied herself out? Had she become barren just by giving birth to four children? What did she do wrong—why did the man never, not once, give her a hint? Mohikanto was marrying again—why did she have to hear of it from old Reboti" (Saikia 11)? In fact, her self-determination of keeping her body off her husband's touch makes her realise that the weakness of her husband lies in the body of a woman, and in the process, she also perceives that her body can no longer be in the possession of her husband. Furthermore, Menoka's realisation that her body is her own property and that nobody holds any right over it is what constitutes her 'self'.

However, talking about the 'self' of an individual, there is no definite consensus among scholars because an individual's 'self' is always a part of his/her psyche. Regarding the concept of 'self', Gail Finn in his articles presents Emerton's idea on 'self': "In the formation of self concept, Emerton (1972) believes that the success of development—self concept and identity—is through the ongoing process of social interactions with people . . ." (2). Even, subscribing the same idea of Emerton, Martin L. Maehr and others states, "It is generally assumed that the concept of self develops as a result of and in response to the reaction of *significant others*" (1). In the novel *The Hour Before Dawn*, the female protagonist Menoka's determination and realisation—that she derives from the interaction with social elements, and which comes through her own psychic conflicts and disturbances—form her female 'self'. In the novel, her self-realisation is alsoreflected in her own words: "She would not allow that power, that masculinity, to return to Mohikanto ever again. Eleven years had made her familiar with all his weak points—and she wasn't too old to teach him a lesson or two yet" (Saikia 46).

It is a fact that as mother or wife, women undertake the privilege of managing their concerned domestic space. As a manifestation of personal as well as private space, domestic space serves as an inevitable part of women's lives: a space in which women associate themselves intimately. Like other women, Menoka is also very much concerned about her own space she shares in her in-laws' household, and she is also no exception to this stereotypical trait. As a housewife that she undertakes the task of managing the household constitutes her domestic space, which she has woven in her psyche after her marriage to Mohikanto. In the context of this anecdote, the domestic space that lies around her becomes a 'psychological construct' rather than a physical one, since she feels the fear of expulsion from the household, and contemplates that her life, along with her own children, will be compromised or undermined with the arrival of a new woman in the household. Theinterference and intrusion of

another woman as a co-wife into her so-called constructed domestic space instils in her the fear of losing the authority over her concerned domestic space. In one instance, immediate after the wedding between Mohikato and Kiron, Menoka'sconcern over the domestic space becomes very much apparent: "Various situations assailed Menoka, making her restless. . . . she would never step into the yard again so that those things would remain out of her sight. She would never look anyone in the eye. Most importantly she would not meet the 'new woman' under any circumstances—she would evade everything and everything" (Saikia 24-25).

The act of Menoka's negotiation with domestic space starts with the advent of Kiron, as Mohikanto's co-wife, in the household. Though in the beginning Menoka is not in a position to cope up with Kiron, but later she gradually learns to adapt to the prevailing situations and circumstances through the discovery and unfolding of events. After the revelation of Kiron's nature and character, she realises that her husband is solely responsiblefor this marriage: "If Kiron had made the slightest attempt at covering up facts, and Menokacould believe that the young woman had seduced her husband, it would be so easy to make life difficult for her! But if what she said was true, she had not married Mohikanto at all—it was he who had married her" (Saikia 33). As a result, instead of holding grudge against Kiron—that she previously bore in her heart, Menoka initiates negotiation with her concerned domestic space. Her principles of negotiation operate on three crucial aspects: co-existence with Kiron under the same roof; adoption of the principles of non-interference; and imposition of resistance on her husband, who needs to be blamed for his second marriage.

Moreover, her negotiation not only remains confined to Kiron but also is extended to her concerned domestic space, which even includes her own children as well as relatives. Even her negotiation with her own children, especially with her first-born son Indro, seems to tougher than what she expects, as she recalls these words: "She could cope with sharing the Mohikanto chapter of her life and keep things well within her control—but what about [herchildren]" (Saikia 40)? The adoption of the principles of non-interference that Menokaembraces as one of her ways of negotiation with her concerned domestic space embeds in it the core essence of her passive resistance against the patriarchal authority. In the novel, she decides to withdraw her body from Mohikanto's reach. By doing so, she not only keeps her body out of her husband's reach but also withdraws her 'self' from her husband's life. During one conversation with Kiron, she transparently mentions that it is Kiron's duty to take care of Mohikanto's life: "In the past few days, she had wordlessly made it amply clear to Kiron—'this

man is solely your responsibility; he has no one but you' " (Saikia 37). The third aspect on which the principles of Menoka's negotiation functions is the imposition of resistance on her husband's advancement towards her private space. Her resistance against Mohikanto, her husband, starts with her disobedience to her husband's wish of using her body as an object of carnal pleasure. What she does actually is that she not only withdraws her body from her husband's touch, but also opposes his advancement towards her body when he shamelessly approaches her with a sexual appetite in his eyes. Even when her husband, Mohikanto, forcefully tries to touch her body, she vehemently protests against his advancement with a cautious warning: "Menoka stepped back into her room and, holding the door planks in either hand, said, 'Don't come to this room like this. When you wish to visit me, bring Kiron along. I shall open the door if she calls to me.' She slammed the door in his face and secured both the bolts from inside" (Saikia 39).

Furthermore, even as she starts loosening her hold on Mohikanto's life, she too desires to find a new way to lead her own life—a way that can bring solace to her distressed life. In order to make herself free from patriarchal imprisonment, she recalls, "All she wanted to do was chart out a path—a path would clear ahead of Mohikanto, but one that he could never, ever comprehend, nor tread on" (Saikia 88). As a matter of fact, she realises that a support, that is, physical as well as mental, is very much necessary to continue her life and struggle against this prevalent adverse situation. And in a man named Modon, whom she embraces to live through, finds the support she hankers after. During one conversation with Modon, she vents her impulsive remarks out to him: "I need a man to call my own—someone who can help me rear Indro, and my other children—someone who is all mine. How can I cope with so much on my own? I had never foreseen that I would need to cope by myself" (Saikia 104)! Further, she adds:

> . . .'You can alone help me, Modon. You alone can be my man. Do you hear me, Modon?' One of her hands covered his right hand resting on her knee. . . .'You told me the other day that nobody had seen tears in my eyes. What's the use of crying? Let's see how long I can survive without tears! (Saikia 104)

Her extramarital affair with Modon takes her resistance to a greater level, without any doubt. Although menoka's resistance seems to be active after she starts an extramarital affair with Modon, yet she keeps this secret within her knowledge, without publicising this matter. One of the reasons for her—that works in her psyche—to do so is the fear of isolation

from the society and social stigma, as she is not in a position to challenge the concerned authority as result of her negotiation with the concerned domestic space. In the context of the novel, Menoka's extramarital affair with Modon does not evoke the sense of challenge as well as threat to the concerned authority: here this extramarital affair provides her with the moral and psychological support in the course of her life and acts a solace to her mind. Since her resistance operates on the principles of absence of consent to an authority, it lacks the essence of 'direct' or 'immediate' force. In addition, the operation of her resistance is limited to a certain boundary and does not even come into conflict with the way of Mohikanto's life, and the presence as well as the intensity of her resistance cannot be felt by the authority concerned. In posing her resistance against patriarchal injustice, what she does is that she withdraws herself from the clutches of Mohikanto's life, which embodies itself as a patriarchal authority; by distancing herself from the authority concerned, her confrontation with the concerned authority has been less and less intense and backed by the symptom of withdrawal, and renders her resistance passive instead of active one.

To sum up, it can be said that in the novel, Menoka's passive resistance posed against her husband acts as an outcome of her negotiation with the concerned domestic space. Her relentless negotiation with the concerned domestic space demotivates her to initiate active measures against her husband. Had she not subscribed to the principles of negotiation, perhaps she could resort to active resistance against the patriarchal atrocity.

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