



THE UNBRIDGEABLE GULF BETWEEN RELIGION AND RATIONALISM IN INDIRA GOSWAMI'S *THE MAN FROM CHINNAMASTA*"

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Abstract

The themes of animal sacrifice and victimization of women are linked in the novel by the common fate of the helpless animals and women. The fact cannot escape the careful reader that while innocent animals are sacrificed to propitiate the Goddess by human devotees who are victims of age old superstitions kept alive by a selfishly motivated priestly class, the human members sacrifice other human beings to propitiate their own sense of power. Ratnadhars, though few and far between, do show courage to redeem the fate of the innocent victims of patriarchal inhumanity, but they are no match to its marauding power. It needs a Jatadhari, inspired by another selfless motivation to see through the machinations of an unequal social system and wage an all out war against its evils even at the cost of his own life.

Religion propagates blind customs beyond reasoning. In the name of rituals, both animals and women are victimized. This issue is skeptically presented in *The Man From Chinnamasta* set in 19th century colonial period written by Indira Goswami, Assamese writer.

Keywords : Scriptures, Victimization, Customs, Rituals, Rationalism

A brief profile of author:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami, better known by her popular name Indira Goswami, is one of the most celebrated feminist women writers of India. Born in 1942, she turned out several creative and scholarly works in Assamese and English languages. *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, is regarded as a classic in Assamese literature and excerpted in Masterpieces of Indian Literature (SahityaAcademy). It is a novel about the plight of Brahmin widows in the *Sattras* of Assam. *The Blue Necked Braja* is perhaps the first novel that traces the plight of Hindu widows popularly called *Radheswamis* in Vrindavan. *Pages Stained with Blood* is a first person account of the Sikh-riots of

1984 in Delhi. *The Man from Chinnamasta*, is a controversial but enlightening novel which criticises the practice of animal sacrifice in the ancient *Kamakhya Temple*, in Guwahati, Assam. *Pain and Flesh* is a rare collection of published poetry in English from Indira Goswami.

Her treatise *Ramayan from Ganga to Brahmaputra* is her magnificent research work. The national award winning filmmaker Jahnu Baruah made a film on her life *Words from the Mist* based on her Autobiography *An Unfinished Autobiography*.

There is a very little research work done on the translated works of Goswami. Baharul Islam Saikia's M. Phil dissertation contains a translation of the well-known novel *Ahiron* with a discussion on

the phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactical and cultural problems faced by the translator in translating the Assamese novel into English. Among the translated novels and short stories of Indira Goswami, "*Devplthar Tej*" is translated as "*Shadow of Kamakhya*" by Apratim Barua. "*Yatra*" is translated as "*The Journey*" by the writer herself. "*The Empty Chest*" is the translated version of "*Udarti Bakac*" by Dr. Pradipta Borgohain. The writer translated "*Sarhskar*", a powerful story, a cinematic version of which is also available. "*Shadow of Kamakhya*" contains some of her English translated short stories in the form of an anthology. Apart from the short stories many of her novels are translated too. "*Pages Stained with Blood*" is translated by Pradip Acharyya from the origin "*Tej Aru Dhulire Dhusarita Prsta*". "*An Unfinished Autobiography*" is the translation of her "*Adha Lekha Dastabej*" by Prafulla Katakya. "*Cenabar Srota*" is translated by Nibha Rani Gogoi as "*The Curent of Chenab*". "*The Blue Necked Braja*" translated by Gayatri Bhattacharyya is a Zubaan publication of the novel "*Nilkanthi Braja*". "*The Man From Chinnamasta*" is the English translation of "*Chinnamastar Manuhtu*" by Prasanta Goswami published by Katha.- "*The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*" and "*Saga of South Kamrup*" are the translations of "*Datal Hatir Uye Khova Haoda*" by the writer herself. "*Adajya*" (a film) is based on her novel "*Datal Hatir Uye Khova Haoda*". A television serial of the same 16 book was telecasted on Delhi Doordarshan under the title "*Dakshin Kamrup Ki Gatha*". Guwahati Doordarshan made a telefilm on her story "*Udarh Bakac*". Delhi Doordarshan made a serial on her "*Bhikshar Patra Bhani*". "*Words from the Mist*" is a film made on her by Jahnu Barua. Besides these, her works are translated into many other languages like Marathi, Hindi, Nepali, Telegu, Kannada and Bengali. The Marathi version of "*Adhalekha Dastabej*" has been prescribed as a text book in Marathi. While in the most recent translation of Goswami Aruni Kashyap has rendered "*Thengphakhri Tahcildarar Tamar Taroval*" into English as "*The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*".

Discussion

The story *The Man From Chinnamasta* emerges in the backdrop of Kamakya hakthipeetha

with its ubiquitous community of motley devotees. As usual, the community is comprised of ascetics, hermits, tantrics, priests and laity, among others. Set in the country's pre-independence phase, when the gulf between rationalism and religious beliefs was at its widest, the writer triggers a sane discussion of important social issues obtaining in particular in British Assam at the time.

The story centres round a foreign character, Dorothy Brown. Upon her return from England after undergoing a medical treatment (for sterility, going by her husband Henry Brown's subsequent claim) Dorothy realises that her husband had been cheating on her and had even impregnated the Khasi woman he had been having an affair with. She ditches her husband, the principal of the local Cotton College and seeks to become a disciple of Chinnamasta Jatadhari, an educated, popular, well-travelled and respected ascetic, committed to eradicate the abominable practice of animal sacrifice at the local temple in the name of religion. Dorothy's husband tried his best to persuade her to return but to no avail. The writer also introduces a potential couple, Ratnadhar and Bidhibala but the marriage between the two never takes place. The latter starves to death after realising that her father had decided to marry her off to a much older and married rich man. She was to be his third wife and achieve what the other two wives could not, namely, bearing him a male child!

Alongside, the writer offers brief glimpses of the history of Assam – how the Ahom kings lost their kingdom to the Mughals in the 17th century and how a confrontation erupted between the English forces and the Burmese towards the end of the 18th century. The writer had to throw in these sweeteners perhaps because the story is set in the 1920s. The historically-uninitiated will welcome such nuggets of information on Assam in particular and the other north-eastern states in general since it renders a better appreciation of the story possible.

Dorothy Brown could not stand her unfaithful husband. When he arrived at Darbhanga House to take her back home, she obstinately refused to return home with him. For her husband, it was not just a slap on the face. It was much more than that.

It was an “affront to the Empire, their British culture, their heritage” as the writer says (Goswami, Indira. *The Man from Chinnamasta*, 34-36).

The writer conveys through her portrayal of Dorothy Brown how Brown applied double standards to judge his wife and himself. His fathering an illegitimate child apparently was no affront to the Empire or his British culture or his British heritage! Even when Dorothy openly accused him of impregnating the Khasi woman, he brazened it out by using diversionary tactics. He accused Jatadhari of casting a spell on her; he accused Dorothy of fornicating with Jatadhari – a mere red herring to detract from the real issue, namely, his illicit relationship with the Khasi woman!

One is moved to tears when Dorothy summons her friend William Smith of the Steamer Company to her presence and tells him nonchalantly and confidently that the beneficiary of her will should be “the Khasi woman’s child by Henry Brown, who until the other day was my husband.” To William’s shocked disbelief, she reiterates, “I shall still make the will even if the child is a bastard.” (Goswami, Indira. *The Man from Chinnamasta*, 64-65). In fact, in the entire novel, one does not come across a character that is superior to Dorothy Brown’s. Dorothy convinces one and all that she leads her own life and has the courage of her convictions.

Through the novel, the writer conveys the relevance of a dispassionate approach to human rights and human dignity. When such an approach is found in a white woman who has made a Hindu pilgrimage centre in India her hometown during the pre-independence days, towards an illegitimate child fathered by her own husband, one wonders whether Dorothy is just another human being or an extra-terrestrial! After all, the child was borne by a lowly, local Khasi woman (at least from the perspective of a British woman) and hence such a sober, dispassionate and rational approach towards the child on the part of the British woman does sound surreal! Through Dorothy, the writer conveys that one does not have to give up one’s values, beliefs or principles; one has to move on, all the same.

Another character that is bound to remain etched in the memory of the reader is Ratnadhar, the favourite disciple of the Jatadhari. An artist par excellence and one firmly against animal sacrifice, he is often blamed when animals like buffaloes and goats brought by the devotees to the Kamakya Shaktipeeta for sacrifice suddenly go amiss the night before the sacrifice! He takes the lead in mobilising support for his mentor Jatadhari’s worthy cause, namely, ending the abominable practice of sacrificing animals for pleasing the God.

Ratnadhar finds a worthy supporter in the beautiful and soon-to-be-married Bidhibala in his fight against animal sacrifice. The tender 11-year-old girl was wise beyond her years. But he soon realises that the girl was gutsy beyond her years too! She seeks Ratnadhar’s help in saving the life of the buffalo she had grown up with. Although he tells her that saving the buffalo from sacrifice will amount to blasphemy according to the scriptures and hence invite God’s wrath, she remains undaunted. Confessing that she has not read the scriptures, she openly states that scriptures that prescribe animal sacrifice do not interest her. Although Sanskrit is the language of the Gods, she does not want to read such books! Ratnadhar reminds her that white gourd, melon, sugarcane and alcohol are as dear to the Goddess as goat’s blood. Yet she does not budge. Instead, with renewed determination, she asserts that she will not read such scriptures. She has no use for scriptures that recommend the killing of animals (Goswami, Indira. *The Man from Chinnamasta*, 104-105).

Bidhibala emerges initially as a girl who can put up with her father’s unreasonable behaviour with great fortitude. However, with her father becoming even more determined to marry her off to the rich, older and much-married man, she begins to see the inwardly. With her father’s insistence that she marry the man he has selected proving to be too unbearable for her, she seeks shelter from the North Shekhadari girls living in the Kamakya caves. Goliath paid the price for underestimating the strength of David. So did Bidhibala’s father!

The Story debates on social change. By tradition, Kamakya is all powerful, a contrast to the

helpless widows of Vrindavan. The Goddess commands blood. Maddened devotees smear the blood on their forehead, dance in it, trance in it. This is Woman's other Avatar—the commandeering authority. Indira Goswami places the story in the 1930's but the sociological implications are absolutely current. Hindu patriarchal traditions have often got away with justifications about oppressive gender practice by claiming that women are worshipped as goddesses", so "what is there to complain about. The tribute to the pedestal and the brutality at home are the contradictions that show up in social space today and have led to the widespread protest against domestic violence. Indira probes the causes, the rituals, the unquestioned "beliefs" which perpetuate oppression.

Who is the man from Chinnamasta, wandering Jatadhari with matted locks who tries to stop the animal sacrifice and arouse a more sensitive conscience of co-existence? Indira's research into history and ethnography showed no religious sanction for the blood rituals. She was appalled by the orgies of the flesh and the celebrations of frenzy. The gentle author and the social activist came together to craft a novel that is a page turner. The distance between religion and ritual is subtly debated.

At the peak of her literary career, this story became controversial as it was a critique of the thousand-years-old tradition of animal sacrifice in the famous Hindu Shakti temple to Kamakhya, a mother goddess, in Assam. Goswami reported that there was even threat to her life after writing the novel. In this novel she quotes scriptures to authenticate the argument she puts forward in the novel – to worship the Mother Goddess with flowers rather than blood. She said in an interview, "When the novel was serialized in a popular magazine, I was threatened with dire consequences. Shortly after this, a local newspaper, *Sadin*, carried an appeal about animal sacrifice, which resulted in quite an uproar—the editor was condemned and a tantrik warned me. But when the appeal was published, the response was overwhelmingly in favour of banning animal sacrifice. I also had to contend with rejection from a publisher who was

initially keen and had promised me a huge advance, but who later backtracked, offering instead to publish any other book of mine. But the rest, as they say, is history and *Chinnamastar Manuhto* went on to become a runaway bestseller".

Conclusion

Indira Goswami, strongly believes in the power of the written world to reorient her readers into understanding the politics behind the institutions of injustice against women. She offers in this novel a counter discourse to show the real face of scriptural discourse and in presenting this counter discourse, she uses literary representation as a device to expose the 'sexual/textual politics' of this religious scriptural misrepresentation of women in which woman is a symbol of 'divinity' to be debased in real life closing all doors for her of seeing the subterfuge played upon her to subjugate her and 'use' her. Far so long have we, both men and women, taken the injustices and violence against women as a natural thing that we have become insensitive to it. If art functions by 'de-familiarizing' the familiar, as Victor Shlovsky (Philip Rice & Patricia Waugh, 2001) has shown, then Goswami hopes to sensitize the reader to this violence and this injustice by foregrounding them and by 'de-familiarizing' them in *The Man From Chinnamasta*.

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