

## **Protesting Female Voices in Mamoni Raisom Goswami 's Short Stories**

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Indira Goswami (1942-2011), more popularly known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami, is a powerful writer of Assamese fiction with her penetrative insight into the diverse, multilayered Indian society and culture. A cursory inquest into her fictional world brings to the fore a consistent pattern carefully designed to voice protest against any anti-human project operative in the society at different levels. Noted critic G.P. Sarmah's remark is pertinent in this context:

Her bold approach with a liberal outlook against anti-humanist traditional values in society shocks and charms her readers at the same time. Time and again, in all her fictional work, she lodges a protest, veiled in art at any offensive against humanity. And in this, women and workers-two most repressed and exploited classes in our society find her sympathetic focal attention. (G.P. Sarmah. *Fiction of Protest: the Novels of Mamoni Raisom Goswami*. Uddipana Goswami (ed), 48)

Her bold and moving narratives delineating frankly the desires and pleasure of women in a language rich with metaphors and imagery expressive of female eroticism, which were hitherto considered a taboo in a typically patriarchal set-up, is quite important in the context of feminist literary studies. In the novel *Ahiron*, one notes the following bold feminist statement:

A woman is completely free to love and bear children according to her own choice. Isn't this the view of Isadora Duncan too? (Tilottoma Misra. *Indira Goswami: Brave, Gentle and Bold*. Uddipana Goswami (ed), 65)

She is unabashed in narrating her own story in an *Unfinished Autobiography*. "In my childhood days I was not allowed to play with low caste children." She wrote. A habitual rebel against the wrongs of the society she "rarely obeyed that rule." She wrote, "Very often I was dragged to the well and buckets of water were poured on my head for purification...I had the least consideration of caste or

respectability. Nor did I think much of the social status of my family.” (Goswami, 2002)

Her concern for a women in society is reflected beautifully in her novel like *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*. The novel, set between the early 19th Century and India's independence, depicts the atrocities perpetrated by feudal monarchs in monasteries against women, particularly Hindu widows. Durga, Saru Gossaine, and Giribala are three female characters in the novel who are forced to eat, live, and interact according to the ashram's strict patriarchal norms. Childhood experiences of Goswami in Vrindavan, her time spent in researching on the lives of widows, form the backdrop of this classic, as she writes of the emotional, physical and social deprivation of women victimised by the typical feudal Vaishnavite sattrā system. The book was adapted to a National Award-winning film *Adajya* in 1996.

Some of her stories carry this spirit even more forcefully. Her voice does not merely question the patriarchal values; an apparent resistance to the discrimination towards women has equally been instrumental in her texts. The primary focus in this paper will be to examine how the 'self' of the author in selected stories question and thereby attempt to protest the 'othering' of sex in a society modeled incorrectly on binary opposition of male-female. In this paper Indira Goswami's short stories are my primary sources and for my secondary sources I have consulted published articles and essays to supplement the discussion.

*Sanskar* (Caste), a significant story by Goswami, stands out in the context. This is a multilayered story with a fine feminist touch. Damyanti, a Brahmin widow, here breaks stereotypes of different kinds. In a traditional Brahmin convention, a Brahmin widow is not supposed to eat fish or meat. Damayanti subverts it clearly. The writer gives a clue about it in the beginning through a statement by Pitambar:

“I've heard she gorges on everything...meat, fish," said  
Pitambar.

(Gohain 271)

Krishnakanta ensures, saying that she is a disgrace to the entire Brahmin community as she has been breaking all traditional values one after another. A hint is also given by Krishnakanta that she also starts keeping extra-marital affairs. As the narrative progresses, Krishnakanta designs a ploy for Pitambar who has no child even after his second marriage and desperately desires one.

Consuming a handsome amount from Pitambar, who is a mahajan, Krishnakanta prursues Damayanti, albeit providing her also a part, to sleep with Pitambar for having a child and eventually to be his wife in future. Things go well until Damyanti, a powerful creation by Goswami, aborts the child form Pitambar by her own choice. This act, whether to carry a child or not, has in fact a strong feminist concern with a patent resistance to the typical patriarchy. The patriarchal dream nourished so desperately by Pitambar is crumbled by Damyanti and is a big blow to the feudal-patriarchal consciousness of Pitambar and others.

On the other hand, the peculiar gaze exemplified by Pitambar's sick wife from her bed is another major aspect that questions the patriarchal mindset of the male characters. She has no importance for Pitambar as she is infertile and appears almost like a lumber to Pitambar. While Pitambar talks about Damayanti with Krishnakanta a serpent like acute gaze of his wife catches his eyes. It may thus stumble upon a key aspect pointed out by French psychoanalysts Jacques Lacan (1901-1981). Lacan opines that man's desire is the desire of the other. The gaze of Pitambar's wife may be a desire for recognition. But largely, her sharp eyes are a reflection of questioning the male design in a society where scapegoating and stereotyping of women are quite common.

Mamoni Goswami's representation of life of women in her stories is not monolithic, but the way she describes the female characters is indeed a replica of how patriarchal framework judges women. She doesn't utter feminist slogans in her stories, but a careful reading would show how a resistance is dominant there. The following observation by Tilottoma Misra is noteworthy:

...Mamoni Raisam's writing is marked by what Julia Kristeva calls 'the flow of jouissance (physical or intellectual pleasure) into language'. Thus though Mamoni has stated that she is not a diehard feminist (*jabardast* feminist), her writings can easily be interpreted as a variety of *écriture feminine* (women's writings). Her language itself bears the imprint of the female consciousness. (Tilottoma Misra. *Indira Goswami: Brave, Gentle and Bold*. Uddipana Goswami (ed), 65).

The treatment meted out to Pitambar's wife by him thus is complemented by Damayanti. Pitambar completely starts neglecting his wife; he ignores her deliberately hoping that he would marry Damayanti one day. But his wish has been crushed by Damayanti. She aborts his embryo developed in her womb. This

demolishes Pitambar's delusion and he becomes insane towards the end of the story as he badly wanted a child to look after his huge property. While he comes to learn that Damayanti has aborted his child, he starts digging the soil at midnight where she buried the child. Damayanti can hear the sound of digging. Terrified, she asks Pitambar:

"Why are you Digging the earth?"

Pitambar looked back at the window but gave no answer.

Again, thud, thud, clomp, clomp! Damayanti was petrified.

"I've buried it-that's true. But what will you find? Only a lump of flesh is lying there".

Pitambar looked up. "It was my child. I'll touch lump of flesh. I'll touch the lump of my loins with my two hands". (Gohain, 286).

With it, Goswami shows how a resistance on the part of a woman could be so powerful! One, however, would be tempted to have the contention that this resistance on the part of Damayanti is passive but perhaps more powerful in a social set-up dominated by patriarchy in its ugly form, because Goswami so deftly sketches Damayanti's character who is reported to 'justify' her belonging to a *sandilya gotriya* Brahmin caste as the reason behind the abortion of the child, while the same woman, in order to subvert patriarchy and her so-called Brahmin lineage, devoured meat and fish also! It is quite interesting to note that Damayanti utilises to fullest degree the inherited caste lineage, veiled in acceptance, to assert her resistance against patriarchy.

The protest is however not always complete or overt; rather extreme domination of female by male finds a moving description in some of her stories. A woman is always an object of lust in her stories for those who nourish and practice patriarchy. In a story entitled *Pashu* (Beast), Nimai Rabha, an innocent girl is killed perhaps after rape. Before the incident, the author describes how male gaze constantly investigates her body. Through the consciousness of Chahabuddin, the author delves deep into the cruel and patriarchal activities of Krisnakanta and his crew. They have been hinted at in the end as the culprits behind Nimai Rabha's rape and death.

In some other stories such as *Udong Bakos* (The Empty Box) the *Riniki Riniki Dekhiso Jamuna* (Seeing Januna Unclearly), Mamoni Goswami reveals the psyche of some female characters who are actually betrayed by their male

beloveds. In *Udong Bakas*, Taradoi's faith in her beloved is finally crumbled as the man arranged his wedding with another woman. In *Riniki Riniki Dekhiso Jamuna* the unnamed female narrator finally realizes her beloved Krishnendu's indifferent attitude towards her whom she continues to love even after her marriage. The male characters are here embodiments of typical patriarchy who surrender before trying situations. A feminist approach can be seen in these stories.

The issue of patriarchy and protest in Goswami's stories are significant and merit in-depth analysis in the light of contemporary feminist theories. As has been stated earlier, the dominant female voice is not one of aggression but that of protest within the confines of the situation.

**Note:**

English translations of excerpts from the stories have been taken from Hiren Gohin (ed.) *Splendour in the Grass*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2010.

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