

SACRIFICE; THE PATHETIC TRUTH OF LIFE AS DEPICTED IN INDIRA GOSWAMI'S *THE MAN FROM CHINNAMASTA*

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Abstract: *The Man from Chinnamasta* is a story of sacrifice, written by a renowned Assamese writer, a Jnanapeetha award winner Indira Goswami and translated by Prashant Goswami. In this novel she portrays the picture of ancient India and the practice of animal sacrifice. Religion has been always a major preoccupation in the novels of Indira Goswami, especially the practices of the orthodox Hinduism, Indira was born and brought up in the midst of these cultural practices and was aware of its violence and cruelties. The story is set in pre-independent British India, particularly around the ancient Kamakhya temple in Assam. When the novel was published in 2005 with a political vision: to initiate a revolution through the denial of some rituals, which are basically illogical and inhuman and thereby bring the changes in the society, a kind of social reformation? But it was not an easy task, like any new change has to go through a lot of hurdles before it got the societal acceptance the practice of animal sacrifice is also in much debate and raised many chaos and confusions. The Brahmins of Assam were much offended because of the writer's direct allegation and demand of foregoing certain rituals. On November 16, 2006 Katha Publication hosted a book releasing ceremony where the launch of Indira Goswami's *The Man from Chinnamasta* translated by Prashant Goswami took place in the Odyssey Bookstore, Adyar. Many eminent thinkers expressed their appreciation towards the narration of the writer condemning the inhuman practice. It was an encounter with the tradition and Indira herself expressed that "It's a gruesome sight there are rivers of blood flowing on festival days. My book raises a simple question--- If you can change tradition to stop human sacrifices why not change it to exclude animal sacrifice." She was even threatened by a group of tantriks but her compassion towards animals and the courage to raise the voice against injustices did not made her to fall back. She was not only a writer but also an Activist who inspired many to fight against the inhuman practices. The writer, also won Sahitya Akademi award in 1983 and Prince Claus award in 2001, has brilliantly interwoven the story of two couples: Jatdhari and Dorothy Brown, Ratnadar and Bihibala, which parallels the theme of animal sacrifice with the sacrifice of a helpless girl Bidhibala.

Key Words: Sacrifice, Khamakya pilgrimage, Jhtadhari, humanity.

The novel drew upon myth, history, religion, folklore, rituals and cultural practices. Assam's cultural practices like Ambubachi Fair and Devadhani festival are mentioned in the novel. Ambubachi Fair is a special and a very auspicious occasion for Assamese, thousands of devotees all over the country visit the temple during the Fair. It is believed that Goddess also become impure once in a year, that is the period of her menstruation, for three days the water also turns reddish which they call as Ambubachi, the doors of the temple will be closed for three days. The Brahmin widows take the rigorous fasting. The darshan will take place on the fourth day. The writer describes it vividly in the novel "Manobhaba, the Mother Goddess enshrined within the cave in the form of a red stone. Touching the stone granted freedom from the cycle of rebirth". (Goswami, *The Man from Chinnamasta* 85) Further she describes 'Devotees from Bankura, Dinajpur, Rajsahi, Nadia, Uttarkashi, Benaras, Gaya, Bindhya, the Tarai region of the Himalayas. Some had arrived by boat. Others had walked the distance. Some were fearful in appearance. Their matted lock, dusty as the hills, spreading out like many pythons, some wore just the koupin loincloth. Some had painted their bodies with ash; three vaisnavites with flowing hair carried their tridents through the northern door to join the assembly by the side of the Soubhagya Kunda. They had been making the sacred Kamakhya pilgrimage for years now, since the temple doors were closed for Ambubachi a huge crowd swarmed around the Soubhagya Kunda. The water in the tank was murky. The Raja of Darbhanga had built a separate tank for the goddess. Even this water had taken on a coppery hue.' (Goswami, *The Man from Chinnamasta* 85) During Devadhani festival, Goddess Manasa is worshipped. The belief is Manasa is a Goddess of Snake, there are two snakes on the shoulder of Goddess and other two are on the head. A great deal of animal sacrifice happens on this day, Buffaloes and goats are sacrificed and the heads of goats will make a huge hill. It is also believed that human sacrifice is more worth. If anyone offers his/her blood their desire will be fulfilled in six months. Hence many sadhus and tantriks are preaching and inspiring the devotees by saying 'come forward, the scriptures say that all you need is to offer two drops of your blood two drops of blood on a lotus petal. Just two drops from your own body come, come; anyone who offers a bit of flesh, the size of a

sesame seed from his chest will have all his desires fulfilled within six months. (Goswami, The Man from Chinnamasta 74).

The writer, born in a traditional Hindu Brahmin family aware of the exploitations and injustices embedded within the stricture of religion as rituals and practices. We can witness the writer's power of story-telling as the story unfolds with the flow of Brahmaputra. The story begins with the description of the river which trailed across its misty coverlet- white against dappled white. Mighty shanks striped silver, a leucoderma victim, nuzzling at a widowed mother's breast. The setting is around the Kamakhya temple near Guwahati. The mythological origin of the temple gives us the story of Shiva, When Daksha organises a yaga he deliberately did not invite sati his daughter and her husband because she has married against the wish of her father, still sati goes there only to get humiliated, depressed by the behaviour of her father she jumps into the yaga fire. Furiated Shiva dances holding the dead body of sati, horrified by this Vishnu with his srachakra cuts the body of sati. The parts of the body fell into 51 places which became the Shakti peethas. Sati's 'yoni' fell on Nilachal Mountain which became the powerful Kamakhya temple. The Sanctum of the temple is a small cave with a hidden spring of water that constantly moistens a stone which is structured like female genitalia (yoni). The historical legend says the Ahom kings, who ruled Assam from 1338 AD to 1826 AD reconstructed it worshipped goddess with animal sacrifices.

The story revolves around this animal sacrifice depicting the various characters trying to project their views. The rigid Tantriks like Sinhaduttasharma in favour of traditions and rituals; he is the symbol of fanatic Hinduism who ardently follows the rituals even though he witnesses the failure of those beliefs. The innocent devotees including prostitutes, poor and helpless villagers like Pulu and Dhulia, disillusioned Dorothy Brown, a rebellious Ratnadhar, helpless yet determined Bidhibala, students of 'tol' and college and above all there is Jatadhari. Jatadhari, the man from Chinnamasta is a mystic powerful man who tries to end the animal sacrifice. To his devotees he is a conundrum. His knowledge of history is extensive; the languages he knew are many. There are many rumours about his origin some said he is a scholar from Benaras and others believed that he is from Tanjavore district. The writer brilliantly invokes the aura of mystic in his origin and she chooses not an educated man to campaign against the animal sacrifice but an ascetic .Jatadhari tries to explore the real meanings of Sanskrit scriptures and discusses it in the public to create awareness among the devotees to annihilate the inhuman practice of animal sacrifice. The writer chooses him as the harbinger of the new era because she is aware of the sanctity of kamakhya temple and the exploitations of British raj.

The theme of animal sacrifice is relevant even today because in India we could see this ritual has been in practice at several places. But the writer deliberately situated the story in pre-independent British raj. The period is 1920s which witnessed the change and reform. Not only the impact of western education but also the deep knowledge and deceptive colonialism enlightened the people and initiated the reformative movements all over India. The chinnamasta Jatadhari, spearheads a movement to curb animal sacrifice. His ardent disciple Ratnadhar who is an artist helping him in the signature camp, is a total contrast to the toughness of Jatadhari, with his delicate hands, a trim figure and finely chiselled nose. The crown of thick black hair complemented his aristocratic bearing. He is too sensitive and emotional being almost faints when he watches the buffalo being sacrificed. Lying on the earth, flecks of foam gathering at the corners of his mouth, he cries "Stop, stop don't you see it's terrified, it doesn't want to go with you. See how it defecates in fear. Look at its eyes. Have some mercy on the best. It wants to live and play on Ma's earth. Stop I say! Stop. (Goswami, The Man from Chinnamasta 90). Ratnadhar is a modest man who wants to help others but he is not so strong to encounter the mighty adversaries hence suffers silently, when he sees his strength in Jatadhari, he becomes his ardent follower and Jatadhari helps him to outlet his feelings through paintings. Ratnadhar becomes a fine artist and trying to give message through his paintings. He sincerely helps in the signature camp and tries to collect the information from the people regarding this matter. When he feels that Bidhibala has been victimised by her father then he openly says he is ready to marry her but the fanatic father is strong enough to curb his daring and he lacks courage to protest against it. His love towards her has not been expressed strongly which results in her death.

Dorothy Brown, a British woman in Assam comes to Kamakhya temple in search of peace but she is shocked to see the inhuman practices and rituals in the name of religion. The tantriks and their rituals shows the cunning and hypocrite society muddled in the superstitious beliefs. People who believe in the myth of Kamakhya means Kali, Tripura sundari taken from Kalika Purana, Yogini Purana and Tantra, assert that it is a powerful Shakti Peetha which fulfils the desire of individuals. It's a renowned goddess of desire. Religion is such a strong influence and deep rooted in the minds of the common people that they are not ready to violate the rules of it. Moreover they believe in sadhus and sanyasis as next to God, whatever they say that becomes a verdict, that's why they easily cheat people by misinterpreting the Holy Scriptures. It's like a mass hypnotism where people unknowingly practice rituals, and the fear is always be hovering on them. Dorothy Brown wants to surrender herself to Jathadhari. She is mystically attracted towards him. She has listened to the stories of Shakti Peeta and Jatadhari. People start rumouring about her affair with the ascetic. But she comes over there leaving her husband because of his affair with a Khasi woman. When she enters the vicinity of the temple she feels an unusual kind of fear and her chest heaved like the fluttering wings of a dove being taken to the sacrificial altar. She prefers Jatadhari to her husband. The writer says 'Dorothy's absurd decision to come and live in this fashion wasn't just a slap in his face. "It was an affront to the Empire, their Britishness, and their heritage" (Goswami, The Man from Chinnamasta 35). Henry Brown, a principal of the cotton

college is frustrated to know his wife has abandoned him. He tries all the pranks to make her leave the place and return to him. But Dorothy is more sensible courageous and intelligent enough to realise all those pranks including a rape attempt by a stranger. Her delineation is a great blow to the British Empire. She comes to the temple with broken heart. She gives money to a needy Pullu, she wants to rub ointment to the worn out wrists of the women who spend long hours in kitchen and is interested in bringing an end to the tradition of animal sacrifice. When she witnessed the ritual of animal sacrifice it horrifies her: “they heard the primal cries of animals being slaughtered!”(Goswami, The Man from Chinnamasta 171) “The shrieks of the devotees reached fever pitch. The priests completed their veneration of the Goddess Manasa and brought out the sacrificial machete. A current of anticipation trilled through the crowd. Four men formed a square and lifted the machete on their shoulders. Kali’s mount jumped up on the blade. The applause was thunderous. Dorothy Brown’s eyes welled up.”(172). at the end of the chapter she stood frozen under the tree, a mute witness as a devotee was killed by the buffalo which was brought for the sacrifice.

Her relationship with Jathadari is a mystique one as she says “I shall be your shadow forever, our relationship cannot be defined. It is a very special bond”. But she dies of a bullet shot. Paradoxically she becomes the victim of her own men. Britishers who never cared about their shootings in the vicinity of temple mysteriously kill Dorothy. The shooting practice of Englishmen is compared with this sacrifice, they are practicing it in the vicinity of jungle thinking that there will be no human they also not bothering about killing innocent birds; the writer is sarcastic because they claim that killing is an accident. They knew that jungle is inhabited with many animals and birds but they don’t bother to kill them as they are not owned by anyone. They were even ready to kill a human because they were intoxicated with the power and misusing it to victimise the innocent people.

The writer vividly portrays the horror, cruelty and gore of animal sacrifice; she substantiates her argument with numerous quotes from the ancient scriptures, university journals and government documents. Dr. Kotoky expressed his opinion “While dealing a sensitive religious subject like animal sacrifice, the author entirely depends on reason, thoughtful analysis and concurrence of the scriptures. She is not taking an extreme position, nor has she hurt anybody’s sentiment. There is no question of objecting goddess worship, she is sympathetic towards the variant devotees but the inhuman animal sacrifice ritual is put into debate”.

Another character Bidhibala is also an innocent girl who is against this ritual but she is also helpless as Ratnadhar, her father Singadattasarma a Zealous follower of the goddess firmly believes in the ritual and has already sacrificed a buffalo when his son was sick but he dies, now once again he is ready to sacrifice another buffalo for the sake of his daughter. The paradox is her marriage has been fixed with an old man her life is also on the sacrifice altar soon she is going to be dead(mentally) Ratnadhar wants to help her but don’t know how when she says; “When I see those dark eyes in the light of the earthen lamps, I feel it wants to say something. Just like the tortoise in the sacred Bhairavi tank that crawls out when we call it Mohan, he used to look up when I called, even while he was suckling.”Bidhibala mutely follows whatever her father says; she was there in the temple on the occasion of kumara pooja. She never had the courage to disobey him but finally when she looks at the buffalo and hears it’s pathetic cries she decides to save it and ready to put her head on the sacrifice altar but has no courage to be defiant thus the confused girl runs away from her father and joins the group of prostitutes.

The signature camp started by Ratnadar on the advice of Jathadari is also a symbol of change. Students from the Sanskrit tols of both Upper and Lower Assam, from Kayaram Shastri, Bangshshiram Sarma, Brindaban Keot and Cotton College had gathered at the crematorium to discuss the possibilities and the function of the group. They start collecting the signatures as well as the opinions of the people one of the students even tries to know the opinion of the butcher. When Singhdatta finds his daughter missing feels that Ratnadhar is behind this. He has almost killed Ratnadhar but rescued by Jathadari saying he has noticed a young Brahmin girl in the company of prostitutes from Sulekechi. It is Bidhibala who let the buffalo to go and now abandoning her family flying to choose her freedom. But she dies and her father refuses to perform the last rites, finally a young boy from a family of devotees was asked to do the last rites. Ratnadhar shocked by this death sits weeping by the sacrificial altar. He laments “Bidhibala, they made a sacrifice of you instead of the buffalo”

In the end when all the tantriks challenged jathadari to offer his own blood he drew a razor from his waistband for all to see, slices off a piece of his own flesh from below his navel. Holding his bleeding flesh in one hand he called. “Ma Ma” people looked at him with honour as blood flowed in the sacred abode of the goddess until after midnight. In the morning the clouds burst out and washed all the blood and dirt in to Brahmaputra. In the clear light of day one could see the temple without any single bloodstain. The message is clear. Jathadari a mystic ascetic a link to the common people through Ratnadhar, Dorothy Brown has sacrificed himself for the sake of humane value. All the three, Dorothy, Bidhibala and Jathadari sacrifice themselves to uphold the humanity as the writer said ‘I firmly believe that the world would be a better place if more people understood and appreciated such issues as there in all their complexity. I hope this novel will be just the right catalyst to a making us more sensitive and responsible citizens.’ We should respect Religion but should not follow illogical and inhuman practices without being sceptical. Human values should be respected and followed then only we can make this world a better place to live.

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