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Social and Cultural motifs in Indira Goswami's *The Shadow of Khamakya: A Reading of the short stories*

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Abstract: Women's writing in the north eastern India particularly in Assam began with the British colonialism and advent of Christian missionaries. Educated women who were closely associated with the missionaries, participated not only in literary expressions but also in the social movements and Indian freedom struggle. Morality, domesticity and ideals of motherhood were subjects of interest for the early writers. Patriarchy and subsequent practices were thought as the nomenclature and hence no questioning. Towards the later phase, the post-independence period and beyond women's expressions were more radical in nature. The writings showed some signs of resistance and protest against the patriarchal domination and codes of society. Assamese women writers like NaliniBala Devi, Praneeta Devi, Nirupama Borgohain belong to the second wave and advocated women's emancipation through their writings. Mamoni Raisom Goswami belongs latter part of this period and has successfully given a new dimension to Assamese literature by women.

Key words: Assamese literature, Indira Goswami, Patriarchy, *The Shadow of Kamakhya*.

Dr Indira Goswami (Mamoni Raisom Goswami is her pen name) is a distinguished novelist, poet, short story writer and a social activist from the north eastern part of the country. Her prolific writing career along with being an academician brought immense fame to the Assamese novelist. Her writings portray the cultural landscape, the scenic beauty and also the dark side of the cultural dogma and its practices in the Assamese society but not limiting only to this geographical territory. A recipient of several awards, the most notable one being the Sahitya Academy award in 1983 and Jnanapith award in 2000. Through her writings in the regional language she has critiqued the inhuman practices and atrocities committed in the name of religion, tradition and patriarchy. She companioned for the cause of women especially widowed women and voiced against the age old practice of animal sacrifice in the ancient shakti temple Khamakya in the city of



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Guwahati. Her writings provoked the necessary stir at the same time invoking lot of criticism of writings for questioning the traditional belief and cultural codes. She has almost twenty novels and numerous short stories to her credit besides a great many published research works. She is unarguably a writer of national repute. Her novels have been translated into Hindi, Bangla, English, Kannada, Telegu, Panjabi and Malayalam. Her writing primarily deals with the socio-cultural issues such as exploitation, oppression, women's liberation, and oppressive traditional values and so on.

Amitav Ghosh, a well-known Indian author rightly states: “Indira Goswami is one of the pre-eminent literary figures in India and a woman of remarkable courage and conviction... She has also been an important voice in championing women’s causes, and has done much to highlight the plight of widows.”

The present paper looks at some of the themes and cultural motifs identified in Indira Goswami’s collection of short stories titled, *The Shadow of Khamakya*. The paper explores how the short stories reveal not only cultural identity and thought but at the same time expose cultural tendencies that form the basis of oppression and slavery for the underprivileged, marginalized and non-human entities in a closed social framework.

The Shadow of Kamakhya is a collection of eight of her short stories, some of which have appeared in other anthologies. In all the stories, Dr Goswami enthrals her readers with the kaleidoscopic description of her land and people. The details of the birds, the flora and fauna are vividly described. The characters absorb the ambience of the landscape and are shaped by it. The stories no doubt bring to our mind the cultural landscape of Assam with its vivid description of the land, of its people and the society. Nature plays a significant role in the plot, narration and in shaping the minds of the characters. This reminds one of the notable novelist Thomas Hardy of the Victorian era in whose writings nature almost became inseparable character.

The eight stories in translation, some of which being translated into English by the author herself bring in the socio- cultural aspects of the region. The landscape covering the mighty Brahmaputra, the Khaziranga national park with its wild life, the ancient temple Kamakhya, the



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Satra institution, social and religious practices bring to the limelight the cultural pride of Assam and at the same time evoke the darker aspects of crude realities borne out of the cultural dogma. Culture plays a significant role in shaping the minds of the people and in internalizing the cultural sentiments to the maximum that comes in the way of one's rational approach towards life, thus bringing in a variety of complex issues. Indira Goswami excels in portraying these complexity of life where one is caught with one's cultural roots and the grim realities of socio-cultural tendencies. No doubt the writings expose the greatness of the culture but also critiques some practices that are obsolete in the contemporary situation. The dichotomy and tension within the cultural matrix gets clearly narrated.

The writer questions, challenges and subverts issues that prevail in the society in the name of culture and religion. One such issue that she predominantly takes is the practice of Animal sacrifice as a part of tantric ritual. This becomes a major focus of the short story *Under the Shadow of Kamakhya*. Animal Sacrifice has been an age old practice in old Kamakhya temple since thousands of years. In fact, despite various efforts to stop these slaughtering of animals, even today these rituals are carried out. People and priests in this temple believe that the ten goddesses of tantric shakti needs to be worshiped with blood. They support animal sacrifice strongly and any logical explanation related to this practise is unacceptable to these people. Thousands of Buffaloes, Goats, Ducksetc are sacrificed on the Goddesses' altar. People with this superstition that their troubles and problems of life will be taken away by the Goddess, sacrifice these animals. The religious and cultural affiliation to such practices is narrativised in the story *Shadow of Khamakhya*.

The Offspring brings the plight of women under class and caste barriers. Class and caste sentiments only bring in isolated identities at multiple levels. In this Story Damayanti's course of actions heightens the fact how the age old discourse of 'caste-purity' and 'othering' of people on the basis of the difference in creed/religion is very much instutionalized that one fails to come out of this complexity. Women suffer by and large at this juncture. *The Offspring* which the author herself has translated into English, has vividly brought in the issue of motherhood, patriarchy and casteism. The story also exposes how the body of the women becomes the site of oppression and the very body is used to defy the male order. Social and cultural compulsions berate the society at



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large. The theme of male desire for an offspring has its visibility. The protagonist recognizes her treatment as a commodity, an object of pleasure and a means of acquiring an offspring to continue the family line of Pitambar. The evil gaze of Krishnakanta and Pitambar falls on her body "Her blouse had stretched tight and was pulled up, revealing the white flesh which to the two men looked as tempting as the meat dressed and hung up on iron hooks in a butcher's shop!" (Goswami-70). Damayanti in this short story rebels the societal norms by refusing to feed on the vegetarian food, makes her living and takes control of her body. The character rebels, defies and challenges the expected codes.

The Journey is often classed as a story set against the backdrop of militant violence in Assam. Tilottama Misra in her Introduction to 'The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India' claims that "Violence features as a recurrent theme because the story of violence seems to be never-ending one in this region and yet people have not learnt 'to live with it', as they are expected to do by the distance centres of power" (Aier xix).

The story can be read from the point of view of a mother's love and anxiety for her absent militant son and through the lens of mother-son relationship which is then conjoined with a focus on "contingent" forms of terroristic violence does not exhaust its multi-faceted possibilities. The story also equally brings in the violence faced by women through the character of Konbap's sister, Nirmali whose legs are broken by the people of her village because she dares to fall in love with an "enemy" Indian soldier. Gender violence, political violence, and these two forms of violence share equal space in the pages of the story. The writer captures the complexity of the devastation and decrepitude wrought on a specific lifeworld by the coalescence of these different forms of violence.

A predominantly mimetic narrative that seemingly operates through the codes of realism, 'Jaatra' opens with the unnamed female narrator and the "mainlander," Professor Mirajkar, returning to Guwahati in an "old" Ambassador from a trip to Assam's famous tourist destination, Kaziranga National Park. The narrator and Mirajkar are colleagues at Delhi University. They decide to get back to Guwahati before darkness sets in as the car is an old one. Mirajkar is not afraid of



wild animals, but is terrified of “terrorists” (To be sure, a personal reason is also adduced for this fear as it is revealed that Mirajkar suffered a personal loss during the Punjab insurgency).

The Empty Chest has Taradoias the protagonist. The story reveals the plight of the woman when she learns that she has lived in a world of illusion thinking the lost love was a genuine and sincere one for her and time had not united them.

Some of the dominant issues identified in all of these short stories are;

1. Militant Violence on the psyche of the people
2. The impact of such political turbulence on women
3. Violence against especially women, Brahmin widows in the Satras
4. Violence against animal slaughter in religious institution
5. Caste and class structures and its impact on people especially women
6. Patriarchal undercurrents and its impact
7. Women’s body as a site of regulation and oppressive mechanism
8. Blood as a metaphor and symbol of social atrocities

Postmodern studies exposes the fact that women’s issues cannot be homogeneous in nature and women face different issues in various ways in different geographical locations. Every region has its cultural practices and codes and this has impact on life and society at large. The problems addressed by Goswami are culture specific and may not prevalent in other parts of the country. Postmodern Gender theorist Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* implies that gender is very an internalized factor, appears to be natural and is performatory in nature. The codes set within a cultural framework designates the roles of men and women. Butler claims the performatory nature of these constructs.

In Postmodern and postcolonial line of thought patriarchy, caste and class divisions are power structures that dominant the marginalized via the constructed mechanisms. Culture unfortunately is taken as a mechanism to ‘other’ people and advocate in human practices. Indira Goswami is clear with her objectives of her writing. Through her writings, she peals for a social change where there



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is a social system or structure suitable for both men and women. She is no doubt a social chronicler, social activist, excellent writer and an environmentalist. Her writings could be reader the broad spectrum of postmodernist school of thought and eco-critical phenomenology.

An apt description of Meeta Deka on Mamani Raisom Goswami's "defiance of social norms regarding widowhood by wearing what is considered a taboo, a big bindi on her forehead and red cloths, is a contemporary example of standing up for human rights" (M. Deka 151).

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