



# A Critical study of Indira Goswami's novel *The Man from Chinnamasta* from the perspective of Ecofeminism

Parul Chauhan

Assistant Professor of English, Jawaharlal Nehru Govt. Engg. College, Sundernagar, District Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, India

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**Abstract**— This present paper attempts to analyse Indira Goswami's novel, *The Man from Chinnamasta* from the ecofeminist perspectives showcasing the position of women in an orthodox patriarchal society, and years old saga of animal sacrifice in the name of culture and religion in the Kamakhya temple. From the viewpoint of ecofeminism, the play illustrates the feminist struggles against oppression, environmental destruction, and patriarchy. It emphasises on the interconnecting issues pertaining to the oppression of women and animals. The novel depicts about Chinnamasta Jatadhari, who along with Ratnadhar, an performer and his follower struggle to put an end to animal sacrifice by meeting sufficient marks in favour of the reason to present to the British authorities. The author also depicts her female characters as strong ones who voice their opinion in a firm manner.



**Keywords**— Ecofeminism, Oppression, Violence, Sacrifice and Assertion

Indira Goswami, also known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Mamoni Baideo is an Assamese writer. Her deep efforts to bring about social change through her writings as well as through her role is clearly visible in her works. "Goswami's activism is laced with strong agendas of social change. Not only is she seen negotiating patriarchal oppression, but she is also very vocal about banning religious practices like animal sacrifice in places of worship like Kamakhya" (Pathak & Sarma 10). She demands to abolish the baseless ritual of animal sacrifice in the name of religion and tradition.

Goswami is known as insightful voice of contemporary Indian literature as she not only confronts and deal with the brutal realities of life but take a firm stand for the minorities against the oppressors which is clearly reflected through her endeavour to engender social change through her writings in which she addresses the atrocities imposed upon the oppressed and marginalised sections of the society. She depicts how women in our society are subjected to perpetual sufferings at the hands of men. She throws light on various forms of violence and reflect the conditions of the contemporary society. Goswami says, "I never wanted to appease the readers with lies. Whatever I have written is

true in my consideration. While writing, I colour the reality with only a little bit of my imagination, so I say, I wish to reflect human life as a reality in my literature. I arrange the events happening in reality into the form of stories" (qtd. in Kaur 129).

Her novel *The Man from Chinnamasta* focuses on her stand against immoral age-old practice going on in the famous temple of Guwahati. The protagonist of the novel, Chinnamasta Jatadhari rises in a protest against this cruel ritual. He even starts a signature campaign with Ratnadhar, one of his followers, to stop animal sacrifice in the temple. Jatadhari was joined by many people in the rally and they all signed the memorandum against animal sacrifice. He emphasis that the blessings of Goddess can be sought by offering flowers also instead of blood of animals. Kamakhya is regarded as one of the most important power sources of fifty-one locations where Sati's body parts had fallen. As yoni or vagina has fallen there, it became the most significant site of Shakti worship in India. In the novel, Goswami showcases the myth, history, religion, folklore, rituals and Assam's cultural practices. She vividly illustrates the picture of two significant celebrations that take place in the temple – the Ambubachi and the

Deodhwani. She throws light on the traditions of worshipping and the ways employed by its practitioners for pleasing the Goddess. Animals are killed as a mark of devotion to the Goddess at the Kamakhya temple. The priests bless the animals and consider the sacrifice as a gift to the Goddess and offers it as a prashad to the devotees.

Ambubachi, the annual utsav is organized every year during monsoon in the Kamakhya temple. The fair attracts thousands of devotees all over the country and abroad. It is presumed that once in a year the Goddess becomes impure like any other woman due to menstruation and the temple doors are closed for devotees during these four days. The doors are opened on the fourth day and then pilgrims are allowed to enter the temple.

The novel is also marked by compassion and humanity. As mentioned earlier also, The Chinnamasta Jatadhari, stood firmly against the ritual of animal sacrifice. Likewise, Ratnadhari, his follower, also feels distressed at the treatment of animals. When he saw a buffalo being dragged to be killed, he felt helpless and says, "Stop! Stop! Don't you see? Its terrified, it doesn't want to go with you. See how it defecates in fear. Look at its eyes. Have some mercy on the beast. It wants to live and play on Ma's Earth. Stop I say! Stop!"(100). They are criticised for advocating the fact that the Goddess' blessings can be easily solicited by offering flowers to her instead of killing innocent animals. The Brahmin community got offended on the demand to remove an ancient practice prevalent in the most important Shakti temple of the world. They were of the opinion that this is a religious ritual and people should not interfere in between. Thus, like any other new change, this act of reformation also has to go through a lot of hurdles and societal pressure for the Brahmins of Assam were not supportive of this reformation.

The hermit in the novel also has a very inhuman attitude towards animals. He is a staunch supporter of animal sacrifice and is against Jatadhari and his followers who protested and signed the memorandum against animal sacrifice. He dislikes Jatadhari for his stance over animal sacrifice and says, "The curse of Chinnamasta Devi will blast you to oblivion. Your endeavours will come to naught. The very plan you are hatching to stop animal sacrifice will turn on you like a sword of slaughter. Your blood will flow on the sacrificial altar" (55). Another priest also becomes furious when he comes to know that a devotee has released a buffalo, a couple of days ago and now didn't want to offer the buffalo since it had been freed. Haladhari purohit thundered. "Scoundrel! You will burn for your impertinence. The sacred texts very clearly state that the blood of a deer satiates the almighty goddess for eight months...." (81).

Goswami weaves the story from the ecofeminist perspective and slams the patriarchal constructed realm of male supremacy by bringing to the forefront the inhuman treatment meted out to the women and animals in the society. Goswami's cultural memory regarding cruelty of animal sacrifice and of human suffering is thoughtfully depicted through her characters in her novel. A very close connection between women and nature is clearly visible as she depicts both women and animals as the victims in the male dominated society. Goswami depicted patriarchal dominant ideologies through her work and expresses deep disgust. "There is a meaningful treatment of the influences of institutional practices, marginalisation of religious, ethnic and sexual minorities and the stratified structures of citizenship..."(Pathak & Sarma 2).

Ecofeminism is a multidisciplinary intellectual and political movement which encompasses a variety of theoretical, practical, and critical efforts to understand and resist the interrelated dominations of women and nature. "The term ecofeminism originated with French feminist Françoise Eaubonne in 1974 and became a useful tool to assess interconnections between women's oppression and the ecological crisis" (Eaton & Lorentzen1). Ecofeminists throw light on the men's unjustifiable domination and its impact over animals and women. They emphasise that patriarchy is the root cause of all kinds of social injustice viz sexism, racism, classism, and oppression of nature. The exploitation and domination of women and nature is somehow interconnected at social, economic and political level. Ecofeminist Rosemary Radford Ruether addresses the interconnected issues of women and nature which needs to be eradicated:

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continue to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society" (qtd. in Adams & Gruen 1).

In this patriarchal society, a woman is reduced to just an object and confined to the subservient roles such as the cooks, caretakers of children, the cleaners, and so on. "Walker's writings make clear that intersections of racist, sexist, heterosexist, classist, and, increasingly, speciesist oppressions.... Walker has consistently spoken out in defense not only of marginalized women and people of color but also of animals and the environment" (June 5). The men in power exploit nature for their own benefit, likewise they exploit women for their own pleasure in accordance to their convenience.

Goswami has depicted feminist perspective through her two leading women characters Dorothy and Bidhibala in the novel. Goswami endeavours to bring to the forefront the politics of domination and subjectivity of women by men and interrogate the construction of women's identity. She effectively portrays the experiences of sexist oppression imposed on women through the weaving of themes like oppression and violence. She portrays the plight of women in society through her female characters like Dorothy, Bidhibala and wives of the priests. All these women's voices were silenced and they are not in power to even take decision for themselves. Bidhibala is introduced through the memory of Ratnadhar, who likes her. He met her first in Kumari Puja. During Bidhibala's kumara puja, Shambhu priest argues with a couple of devotees about her attainment of puberty age. He says, "The girl seems to have crossed her twelfth birthday. Let's check her hands, feet and chest." "She has breast!" (47). This comment reflects how a woman is objectified by the males in society which in itself is very awful.

Bidhibala is about to get married to an aged man against her wishes. Bidhibala's father, Singhadatta Sarma has fixed her marriage with a man who is forty years old and already has two wives. Animal sacrifice in the name of religious superstition is once again illustrated through Singhadatta Sarma, the father of Bidhibala who wants to sacrifice a buffalo for Bidhibala's marriage. He says, "I had promised to sacrifice a buffalo. Now I vow to offer two buffaloes to the goddess. I will sell my land if I have to. I swear..." (120). Bidhibala neither wanted to get married to the old man nor was she in favour of sacrificing a buffalo which her father had promised to do. This plight of Bidhibala and the buffalo reflects the oppression of both women and animal at the hands of man and it depicts that men considers it as a matter of right to own and use women without seeking their consent and interest. When Singhadatta comes to know that Bidhibala had freed the buffalo, he grabs Bidhibala by her hair and kicks her angrily. It is rightly said, "...when women raised their voices in public about the lives and experiences of those being exploited, harmed, or disrespected, particularly when it came to animals, they faced a hostile environment" (Adams & Guren 6).

Another character, Dorothy Brown is a foreigner who seeks help from Jatadhari for some solace after being betrayed by her husband. When Dorothy first met Jatadhari, he offered her mahasankha, a garland made of rudrasha beads. He said, "when Shiva saw the cruelty on earth, he wept. Trees sprouted where his tears fell. The seeds from those trees are called rudrasha or god's teardrops. It is said that those who wear these beads need no longer weep because Shiva weeps for them" (23). Jatadhari believes that God will protect Dorothy from the evils.

Goswami has been seen very vocal regarding negotiating patriarchal oppression and banning religious practices like animal sacrifice in places of worship. She portrays the fate of her female characters Dorothy, Bidhibala and the hardworking wives of the priests, representing the plight of conditions of women in our society. She compares the predicament of the women with the sacrificial animals who were being led to slaughter and none of them were allowed to have the agency to decide the course of their lives. "The sacrifice of animals at the holy altar of the Mother Goddess, for instance, clearly overlaps with victimization, passivity as well as the power of the feminine. Eroticism and spirituality are combined with the symbol of blood that gets connected with life, death, sexuality, spirituality and pollution" (Chauhan 152).

Goswami also throws light on the concept of sisterhood. She depicts the concern of one woman for the other woman. Dorothy asks the priest's wives, "What happened to your hands? .... One of the women took off her Anchal. "It's because we spend all our lives in the kitchen, cooking." "Cooking?" "Yes. If we don't cook for jajmans –our patrons – who will?" (30-31). And later when Dorothy was asked by William about her beneficiary, Dorothy said quietly, "It is for Khasi woman's child by Henry Brown, who until the other day was my husband" (65). She was not envious and was compassionate about the woman's child.

Once Bidhibala asks Ratnadhar to take off the cover of his painting and asks about it. Ratnadhar then tells her the meaning of the painting of king Rudrasingha in death and reveals about what happened when the dead king's body was taken to the capital. He further explains, "The girls who used to dance in the temple were suspected as spies who had cast a spell on the king. They were sentenced to be crushed to death between bamboo poles" (99). The story terrified Bidhibala. She gets emotional and questions the judgment that how could they punish the girls when they were not sure about it. Ratnadhar responded, "what difference was there between sacrificial animals and women?" (99). This instance shows that women are blamed and have to face the cruelty and atrocities at the hands of men. In a patriarchal society, women are held accountable for all negative things and are mistreated. Anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner rightly explains in "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" "women occupy a subordinate position in all cultures, even so-called matriarchal societies. Her contention is that this global subordination comes from one primary ideology: women are associated with nature, and men with culture. Ortner is clear that these categories are constructed" (June 54).

Bidhibala is one who gives up her life due to the societal and patriarchal pressure of marrying an aged and already

married man totally against her wishes. She was left with no option and left her house and found safety among a bunch of prostitutes where she refused food and water even though they did not force her into their agreement, and she died horribly.

The British lady Dorothy deserts her husband Henry as Henry was in an illicit relationship with a Khasi woman and got her pregnant in the year Dorothy was away receiving fertility treatment. Dorothy discovers multiple letters and finally decides to divorce her husband. To cope with the distressful situation and to seek some tranquillity, she moves to the Darbhanga House, which served as a shelter for traveling ascetics in the past, and turns into a Jatadhari disciple. Dorothy starts living near the Kamakhya temple and later develops a kind relationship with a Jatadhari which becomes a source of malicious gossip among the people in the locality. In order to get over with this kind of personal attack on their characters, they both decide to leave the place for some time. A rumour was spread that Dorothy is carrying a child in her womb. Group of idlers gathered and says, "The Jatadhari will get a taste of the memsahib. He will ask her to put on the mahasankhamala for the fulfilment of her desires" (21). Such kind of statements throw light on the mentality and attitude of judgemental society towards women. Though Dorothy's husband Henry was having an extra marital affair, nobody raised their voice against him because he is a man who is allowed to commit adultery. But Dorothy is slammed and humiliated for no reason just because she is a woman.

Dorothy's husband Henry was very revengeful towards her. He was furious and talked to her in a very derogatory and disrespectful manner, "Come on you stupid cow!".... You slut! Mother of all whores! That's what you came for? To fornicate with that godman fellow?"(35). To dissuade her from leaving him, to scare her, he sent somebody to rape her. This attempt of rape of Dorothy prompts the Jatadhari to move her away from Chinnamasta for a few weeks but Henry got her murdered. Before death, Dorothy came to the realization that she had a unique kind of relationship with Jatadhari as she expressed her feelings just before she was shot, "I shall stay, I shall be your shadow forever. Our relationship cannot be defined. It is very special bond" (174). Goswami vividly illustrates the reality of life in different levels of society and the sufferings of people in her writings.

Goswami portrays her female characters very strong who retaliates against the wrong being done to them by men and assert firmly in the face of oppression:

Moreover, the novelist presents the troubling situations in the city when ethnic identities and existence of the religious minorities are threatened by the dominant. However, the

characters assert their individuality; they struggle for freedom and reject different forms of dominations. However, the conflicts between the dominant and the powerless are constantly portrayed in the present novel." (Kaur 141)

When Henry sends his message through his subordinate, Dorothy asserts, "From now on, I have nothing whatsoever to do with your master. I shall decide what is best for my welfare and honour.... Tell your master he is never to try and visit me here" (20). And later, when Henry Brown himself tries to convince Dorothy to come back home with him, Dorothy takes a firm stand and says, "I'm not going back. Your Khasi woman is pregnant." (35). This was a slap on not only his face but to all the Men, Britishers and their Empire.

Also Dorothy Brown always was completely against animal sacrifice which she depicts by supporting Ratnadhar and allowing him to work in her house for a signature campaign. A firm stand against animal sacrifice is also reflected through a little old woman who pushes through the crowd and throws herself on the sacrificial altar and cries, "A little while ago it was eating grass and leaves. Why did you kill the helpless soul? It was alive....O you bloodthirsty goddess, take my head as well" (93). "Ecofeminism posits that the domination of "nature" is linked to the domination of "women" and that both dominations must be eradicated" (Adams & Guren 1). Tracing the mistreatment of women and animals at the hands of men, it became a matter of concern for ecofeminists in general and women in particular to take a firm stand against it and break their silence.

Bidhibala is also seen challenging the ritual of the animal sacrifice due to her love for the calf who was to be sacrificed to ensure a good marriage for her. Bidhibala feels compassion for the animals who are sacrificed for the sake of human's benefits. "She prayed to the goddess to take her life and spare the animal" (102). She held onto Ratnadhar's feet and requested him to save the calf. Finally, she sets the calf free and runs away from her family, though, unfortunately, Bidhibala dies. "Bidhibala, they made a sacrifice of you instead of the buffalo" (156).

Ecofeminism emphasises that woman and nature are interconnected deeply. Donovan poignantly expresses:

For obviously, unlike human workers, animals are unable to share their critical views with other animals or to organize resistance to their objectification and (in their case) slaughter.... In the case of animals, it is clear that human advocates are required to articulate the standpoint of the animals—gleaned, as here argued, in dialogue with them—to wit, that they do not wish to be slaughtered and treated in painful and exploitative ways. And human advocates are

necessary as well to defend and organize against the practices that reify and commodify animal subjects. (Donovan 61)

Through this novel Indira Goswami has depicted her deep commitment and dedication towards eradication of injustice and oppression against women and animals in the name of religion and tradition. She endeavours to bring a social change by taking a bold step in this direction which is delineated through her strong characters in the novel.

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