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The Intersection of Culture, Religion and Femininity in Indira Goswami's novel *The Man from Chinnamasta.*

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Religion plays a pivotal role in structuring and maintaining a society by imposing certain morals and norms. Like any other religion, Hinduism has led the Hindus to live in a particular way since time immemorial. Indira Goswami portrays the distressing conditions of widows living in the Vaishnavite Satra. This integration of the woman with religion becomes the core theme of Goswami's novel, *The Man from Chinnamasta* (Chinnamasta 2006), emphasises on the interconnecting issues pertaining to the oppression of women and animals. In the novel, Goswami examines and analyses the ancient religious tradition of animal sacrifice at the Kamakhya temple situated in the city of Guwahati in Assam. The novel, when it was published, generated great controversy and commotion across many orthodox sections of society that regarded the book to be an attack on ancient religious rituals and practices. However, the book and the author received a groundbreaking support from the general mass as well as animal rights groups that demanded the banning of animal sacrifice at the temple.

Keywords: Religious rituals, sacrifice, feminine principle, Kamakhya, sati.

Introduction

Chinnamasta shares the geographical locale of the kamakhya temple and the river Brahmaputra that flows next to the hill on which the temple stands. The narrative tapestry is of the novel is rich with the complex coexistence of apparent irreconcilables like feminine frailty and male dependency on the feminine principle. This paper investigates how Indira Goswami's *The Man from Chinnamasta* exposes the patriarchal violence embedded within Hindu ritual practice and reconfigures the feminine principle as an agent of resistance. Unlike the traditionally accepted concept of the feminine principle and its essentialisation into immutable categories, the narrative gradually unravel and interrogate the concept to reveal its constant interaction with socio-religious constructs. 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. The representation of the feminine principle is thus highly nuanced with both the transcendent and the mundane continuously contesting and collaborating with in the construct. There is a continuous process of what appears to be the creation of normative archetypes in the description of women characters as well as the goddess only to be demolished and overthrown later.

Goswami uses both human women and the goddess Kamakhya as charged symbolic sites where cultural, religious, and gendered meanings are made and contested. The novel foregrounds the female body as devotee, widow, activist, sex worker, and priest's wife. Their bodies become the ground on which religious traditions and rituals play out, both literally and symbolically. In doing so, the story shows how practices like animal sacrifice mirror a larger pattern of violence against women that society has come to accept as normal. Goswami also offers a different reading of the goddess. Rather than a bloodthirsty figure who demands sacrifice, she presents the goddess as powerful, free, and compassionate, a truly feminine principle. This reinterpretation separates the worship of Shakti from male control

and reveals rebellious possibilities that were always present within the tradition itself. This double move, showing how male religious authority has appropriated the goddess to justify sacrifice, and then reclaiming her as an ally of the vulnerable allows the text to critique the brutality of ritual and its gendered underpinnings while still remaining inside a recognizable cultural and religious framework. Through this, Goswami transforms the female body and the goddess into tools of feminist resistance that challenge both the literal slaughter of animals and the symbolic sacrifice of women in the name of culture and faith.

Chinnamasta is located in pre-independence colonial Assam. Chinnamasta is considered as the part of the broader Kamakhya lore. The origin of the Kamakhya temple, alive in local lore as well as in the Kalika Purana, the ancient Sanskrit compendium, is traced back to the legend of Sati, who was the daughter of Prajapati Daksha and the wife of Lord Shiva.

The Kamakhya temple is one of the most important sites of tantric worship and the sect of Sati followers. Literally meaning the 'renowned goddess of desire', Kamakhya is iconically represented by a shape similar to that of the female vulva. The temple complex has within it a set of individual temples dedicated to the ten Mahavidyas, or ten forms of the goddess as perceived in Shaktism, which considers the meta physical reality as being feminine and the Devi, or the goddess, as being the supreme source of all energy. Chinnamasta, or 'the one with a severed head", is one of the Dasa Mahavidyas, a part of Kamakhya lore belongs to the esoteric tantric tradition and the goddess referred to in the title of the novel *The Man from Chinnamasta*. The goddess is represented as nude and self-decapitated, standing on a copulating divine couple. The goddess holds her severed head in one hand and a scimitar in the other. Three streams of blood sprout out of her neck. One stream ends in the severed head of the goddess and the other two in the mouths of the two figures standing next to her. Clearly, Chinnamasta may be seen as representing many contradictory aspects of life, including death, fury, sexual energy, spiritual energy and sacrifice, including self-sacrifice. This concept of self-sacrifice is not limited only to the icon of the goddess and is depicted in the novel

as a practice followed by ordinary devotees as well. One such incident is described in the following lines:

> A straggle of people followed [a] palanquin. It was the sort used for carrying the sick. Henry noticed the man inside was wounded, his clothes were bloodstained.
>
> A priest stopped at the sight of a white man.
>
> 'What happened?" the munshi enquired.
>
> A pilgrim from Coohbehar. His eldest son is sick and he has no money for treatment. Can't afford to sacrifice a goat or a buffalo. So he offered his own blood.'
>
> 'His own blood?" Brown was astounded. (33)

Philosophers and scholars have tried to analyse the symbolic place of blood in societies but its complexity has led many of them to describe it as 'a signifier of nearly everything' (112). 'Not only does blood have a remarkable range of meanings and associations,... but many of these encompass their antinomies' (2).

The antinomies or the paradox of the blood image persistently recurs not just in literary and creative constructs but also in ritual practices described in Chinnamasta. The blood ritual, or the sacrifice of animals at the altar of the goddess, comes to a standstill due to another 'blood cycle', that of menstruation of the goddess. Goswami mentions this in Chinnamasta when she says that:

> The temple doors were shut. The Mother Goddess was menstruating. Her loins were covered with a red cloth. Every year on the seventh day of the month of Ashaad the temple closed for three days. It opened on the fourth day.(79)

The paradoxical image of blood with multiple connotations of life, death, purity, impurity, taboo and pollution is too obvious for comment. Unlike mainstream Hindu deities, Chinnamasta embodies unapologetic female sexuality, autonomy, and power. She represents the acceptance of the female body in all its raw, unfiltered forms, including menstruation, sexuality, bodily fluids and elements traditionally deemed 'impure' in patriarchal and brahminical systems.

Goswami utilises Chinnamasta as a metaphor. By centring this goddess, the novel challenges the traditional view of the feminine body as impure. Instead, the body becomes a symbol of sacred power. The women associated with the temple, particularly the widows and other female temple workers, embody Chinnamasta. Their bodies, usually exploited within the temple economy, are repositioned as vessels of divine power, thus transforming them from objects of exploitation to sites of resistance. Historically, Radheshyamis were women dedicated to the temple, traditionally performing dance and other rituals. Over time, the system became corrupted, and Radheshyamis were often forced into sexual servitude, making their bodies commodities within the temple economy.

In the novel, Goswami illustrates how the Radheshyamis utilise their bodies to gain agency. Instead of accepting their role as passive victims, they navigate the temple premises doing chores to acquire financial independence, social influence, and autonomy.

Thus they bring a significant portions of the temple's income, received as *dakshina (donations)* from devotees. As they collect these donations, they retain a portion for themselves. By doing so, they create their own economic power. This economic autonomy is a direct act of resistance against the patriarchal temple economy and exploitation. Particularly by singing Bhajans and doing temple rituals, they reclaim their body. These performances are not merely for entertainment; they are sacred acts. By performing rituals connected to Chinnamasta, they assert that their bodies are sacred, directly opposing the societal narrative that labels them as 'polluted'. Their artistic expression becomes political resistance. Through dancing , singing and doing rituals Radheshyami's and other women temple dwellers asserts their identity and repudiate the idea that they are impure, polluted and sinned.

The association between blood and the organic and the primeval is stressed by Mary Douglas, who approaches blood as what she calls a 'natural system of symbolizing' (xxxiii). She describes it as a 'natural symbol' that generates and activates our primal connections with our origins. The power of blood is accepted in all cultures of the

world. Its connotation, however, gets impacted by a whole array of 'socio-sacred' relations, including those of power and control. The symbolism of menstruation within this framework, needless to say, is connected with the gender paradigm that sculpts it to fit into the male-focused enquiry and taboos since 'menstrual blood is viewed as especially dangerous to men's power (129). Patriarchal religious systems, including Hinduism, enforce a strict purity-pollution binary, where women's bodies, especially during menstruation, are considered polluted. Within the temple economy, this ideology is used to control and restrict women.

Goswami leverages the inherent nature of the Chinnamasta deity to dismantle this binary. As Chinnamasta is depicted drinking her own blood, she inherently includes what society deems 'polluting'. By worshipping Chinnamasta, the women in the temple openly embrace bodily fluids and processes, such as blood and menstruation, as sacred.In the novel, scenes involving rituals that incorporate these elements showcase women refusing to hide or ashamed of their bodies. For instance, a ritual performed during menstruation is presented as a powerful, sacred act, rather than something to be concealed. By normalising and revering these aspects of the feminine body, the women resist the imposed purity standards, transforming their bodies from sites of shame into sites of sacred resistance.

Emile Durkheim argues that emergence of human religion, along with its collective rituals as well as its taboos, can be traced to its intricate relationship with menstruation, which is perceived as both divine and polluting. The gendered gaze thus transforms the exclusive energy of the feminine body and sexuality into a frailty and a flaw from which neither the women nor the goddess in Chinnamasta is spared. In *The Man from Chinnamasta*, Indira Goswami shows that the world of sacrifice at the Kamakhya temple is not only a religious practice but also a mirror of how patriarchy works in society. This sacrifice in the temple symbolically represents the whole system in which animals are bought, killed, and offered to the goddess in exchange for blessings, forgiveness, or success. This blood becomes a kind of currency: men bring goats and pigeons, priests perform the rituals,

and in return they gain spiritual merit, social status, and very real income. Around this, a trade grows, probably selling sacrificial meat, selling the red "menstrual" cloth of the goddess and collecting fees from pilgrims. Hence blood and bodies are constantly turned into profit and power.

The same logic goes well with the political economy of patriarchy that rules the lives of women in the novel. Patriarchy also lives by sacrifice. It demands that someone weaker must pay the price so that powerful men and institutions can go on unharmed. Just as innocent animals die so that devotees may feel purified, bodies of women and labour are quietly offered up to keep the temple and the household running. Widows, servants, sex workers, and temple women cook, clean, serve, and even offer their sexuality, while male priests and patrons hold the money, the ritual authority, and the right to speak for the goddess. By placing scenes of sacrifice side by side with scenes of women's exploitation, Goswami makes the parallel clear. In both economies, someone voiceless is treated as expendable, their pain covered over with the language of duty, purity, and religion. The goat on the altar and the woman in the kitchen or in the priest's room share the same fate: their bodies are used so that others may remain powerful and pure. In this way, the temple's symbolic trade in blood reflects and supports the wider political trade in women's lives under patriarchy.

The major themes, symbols and Leitmotifs are developed and well- knit with great detail in Chimamasta. The Temple of Chinnamasta is poised at the intersection of traditional subservience to normative structures and the winds of activism, rights, liberation and democracy that question both the oral and writing taxonomies. The struggle against imperialism moves hand in hand with that against gender injustice and animal sacrifice.

It is through the arrival of the gramasavika that the writer weaves the theme of anti-imperialism in to the story. The gramasavikas, who were 'Gandhians' are, described in Chinnamasta, where, among other things, has taken the shape of a full-fledged organized protest against the Simon Commission that was sent to India in 1928 to look in to the possibility of the constitutional reforms. The violence of

imperialism is coalesced with that of animal sacrifice against the background of the of Gandhian of non-violence. The white men were growing cautious. Volunteers were prepared to lay down their lives for the motherland. Mahatma Gandhi had lunched a war of emotions where moral issues took the place of bullets.' (146). All these multiple strands get interconnected through a whole range of characters, especially the enigmatic tantric Chinnamasta Jatadhari (Chinnamasta's worshipper with long, matted locks), who leads the protest against animal sacrifice.

This is despite the admission by Jatadhari that people like him 'hold [their] souls together with the skins of sacrificed animals' (43). It is Jatadhari who suggests to Ratnadhar, the sensitive, young artist, to collect signatures of people in support of ban on animal sacrifice. This produces 'a huge mountain of signatures,... Their presence was so potent, no one could possibly feign ignorance . . . the matter might . . . be referred to the courts of law' (161). The plan clearly employs the stratagem of democratic protest against established structures. Jatadhari also suggests to Ratnadhar to paint the scenes of bloodshed and sacrifice that had regularly recurred through the history of the region. While it is accepted that generally 'folklore seems to have a greater power than history', Ratnadhar's paintings like the one denoting a group of men blood red robes [standing! beside the Saubhagya Kunda the young priests and the old, the acolytes and the celebrants… the one who performs the sacrifices. In the 'background was the blood-soaked altar' (98) generate the visual record of the region along with the visual representation of gruesomeness of sacrifice. The theme of animal sacrifice is relevant even today because in India we could see the ritual has been practice in several places. 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.

In *The Man from Chinnamasta*, the world of colonial modernity that trains and promotes, English education, reading newspapers, understanding new laws and reform movements presses refute the old hill of Kamakhya and quietly unsettles the older, gendered

rules of devotion. Traditionally, a "good" woman's bhakti is measured by obedience and sacrifice, the way she serves husband, priest and goddess, accepts animal sacrifice as divine will, and offers her own labour and suffering without complaint. Her tenderness toward animals or her doubt about cruel rituals must remain private. Voicing against it is almost sinful. Under colonial modernity, new ideas arrived. To discuss or talk of "civilisation," non violence, animal suffering, rights, reform, the dignity of the individual have become normal and essential. Educated men and a few newly literate women begin to say that a true Mother goddess could not delight in blood, that compassion itself might be the highest form of worship. This allows women's bodily revulsion at sacrifice and their pity for goats and pigeons to appear not as weakness, but as a more ethical kind of devotion.

Yet this same modernity does not simply free them; it entangles them in fresh demands. Male reformers, often trained in English ways of thinking, speak in the name of both reason and the Goddess, and also in the name of the Nation. They condemn sacrifice as "backward" but still expect women to remain pure. Thus a woman finds herself pulled between two scripts of devotion: the old one, which asks her to accept blood and silence; and the new one, which invites her to reject cruelty but still to sacrifice herself for family, temple or nation. Goswami uses this tension to show that colonial modernity complicates, rather than simply overturns. The gendered ethics of devotion opens a space where women's compassion can challenge ritual violence, even as both empire and nationalism continue to rest on women's bodies and faith.

In the novel , goswami narrates: "While showing his painting to Bidhibala, the young girl with whom he is in love, Ratnadhar wonders, What difference [is] there between sacrificial animals and women? (99)". The nubile Bidhibala is to be married off to an elderly man to become his third wife. The rhetorical question immediately unveils not just the connection between gender, 'visuality' and religious practices but also their dynamic roles in generating, legitimising and reproducing identities and community/social codes. These however get challenged by the young Bidhibala not due to any well-planned

strategy or any conscious ideological position but simply due to her love for the calf who was to be sacrificed to ensure a good marriage for her. Bidhibala's love and compassion for the calf makes her weep for helpless animals sacrificed to bring benefit to humankind. 'She prayed to the goddess to take her life and spare the animal' which had to be sacrificed for her benefit. She pleads with Ratnakar to save the calf (102):

'He (the calf) understands everything! 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. She burst into tears. (106)

It is her love for the vulnerable animals that gives her the courage to free the calf and flee from her family. Unfortunately, Bidhibala dies in the attempt and when Ratnakar hears the tragic news he once again identifies the sacrifice of animals with the repression of women saying, 'Bidhibala, they made a sacrifice of you instead of the buffalo' (156).

It is within this framework that the character of Dorothy Brown, wife of Henry Brown, the principal of Cotton College in Guwahati, steps into the already dense narrative of Chinnamasta. She leaves her husband to come already dense narrative of Chinnamasta. She leaves her husband to come and live at Darbhanga House close to the temple and the Brahmaputra after she discovers her husband's affair with a Khasi girl. She visits the Jathadari and requests him to help her achieve 'peace of mind (13). Her intimacy with Jatadhari grows and she becomes a comrade in arms in his protest against animal sacrifice. She goes away with him to spread the message and when they return, she is believed to be carrying his child.

Dorothy is accused of 'going native and for Henry her 'absurd decision to come and live in this fashion wasn't just a slap on his face. It was an affront to the Empire, their Britishness, their heritage (35), Gender and imperialism clearly get imbricated into each other though it is quite evident that in this specific case it is gender that becomes the fundamental ingredient of socio-political structuring. Henry 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. Simone de Beauvoir delineates:

> According to French law, obedience is no longer included among the duties of a wife, and each woman citizen has the right to vote: but these civil…It is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separated her from the male…Once she cease to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator.(338)

Here, Dorothy's 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!" (171)". It is due to this that very soon one discovers an overlay between the characters of Dorothy and Bidhibala. Dorothy, like Bidhibala, is killed in the end and all evidence points to her husband being the killer. Dorothy is white. Dorothy while alive managed to subvert the gendered power equation. Spivak points out that:

> Subaltern historiography raises questions of method that would prevent it from using such a ruse. For the 'figure' of woman, the relationship between woman and silence can be plotted by women themselves; race and class differences are subsumed under that charge. Subaltern historiography must confront the impossibility of such gestures. The narrow epistemic violence of imperialism gives us an imperfect allegory of the general violence that is the possibility of an episteme.(28)

Dorothy in contrast to Bidhibala has established the exclusive power of feminine body and sexuality. She proved that an woman can decide the boundary of her body. Identified with the goddess, both women ensure that they obtain suitable sacrifices that are not bloody

but still harsh. Henry Brown is divested of all property that Dorothy held, for she leaves behind a will declaring that all she owns must go to the unborn child of the Khasi woman who is Henry's mistress. In doing so, she ensures that Henry's sexual encounter with the already disenfranchised colonial woman does not become an economic plunder as well.

Presenting a huge canvas, the novelist illustrates that though the cosmopolitan city offers opportunities for economic prosperity and the sense of security for the community , yet an upsurge is seen in the domination of the orthodox over the religious minorities. A counter hegemonic narrative is the account of resistance of the people who oppose animal slaughter in the name of pleasing the goddesses . Also, the plight of women in the public realm leads to the shrinking of the liberal spaces. Set in the Assam of 1920s, The Man from Chinnamasta is the story of the clash of two ideologies. On the one hand , we have the powerful community of priests and their patrons who are in favour of animal sacrifice and consider it of paramount importance in regard to shakti tradition of worshipping the goddess. On the other hand , there is the titular man from Chinnamasta, The ascetic known only as Jatadhari, and his followers who firmly believe that the goddess can be worshipped equally well with flowers and therefore take a stand against the practice of sacrificing animals. It is this tension between the two fractions that becomes the central force of the novel that drives the plot forward. The metaphysical or religious truths behind these beliefs remain unclear and undetermined.

It is clear from the narrative that there is no difference between the animals and human beings who sacrificed their lives in the name of religion. Bidhibala is a victim, a muted sacrifice in the hands of her father. She was forced to live the unhappy life for being a widow. A Hindu orthodox widow cannot remarry at that time and so Bidhibala gave up on her Christian lover. On the other hand Dorothy, being an independent woman questions the infidelity of her husband and liberates herself from the ties of her marriage decides to live alone is murdered by the men send by her husband. She is also slaughtered like the animal in the temple. The religion secretly acted

as the perpetuator of the male dominance and female subordination. Dorothy and Bidhibala can be equated with the sacrificial goat. Both are murdered by this patriarchal society where males got the upper hand. Women are glorified onlt to limit her freedom, and to crush her personality to the level it favours their male counterparts. Thus the meek, innocent and vulnerability are the images that we get from the concept of ideal woman.

Clearly, the women in Chinnamasta go through various degrees of the ritual of sacrifice at the altars of many different socio-economic and religious codes. Even though they faced difficulties, they are portrayed as strong women who retaliates against the wrong being done to them by men and assert firmly in the face of oppression. However, we are never allowed to forget that the cosmic energy that dominates the Kamakhya temple is feminine and closely identified with the spectacle of disempowerment and control that goes on in the lives of people living under its shadow.

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