



## WOMEN IN INDIRA GOSWAMI'S *THE MAN FROM CHINNAMASTA*: AN ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

With feminism which fights against gender inequalities as its roots, Women's Studies flourished in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is an interdisciplinary academic discipline with its focus on the works written by women or about women and concentrates on studying the various experiences of women around the globe. Indira Goswami is a representative voice from Assam, India who has a number of novels to her credit. Translated to English by Prashant Goswami, *The Man from Chinnamasta* is a plea to put an end to the practice of animal sacrifice in the Kamakhya Temple in Assam. Set on the banks of Brahmaputra around the Kamakhya Temple in British India, the novel narrates the story of the learned ascetic Chinnamastajataadhari and his many followers who strive to end animal sacrifice. Carefully embedded within the novel are the stories of Dorothy Brown, a British woman who seeks the jatadhari for peace of mind, and Bidhibala, an Indian child who at the age of eleven is forced to marry a forty year old married man with two daughters. This paper has attempted an analysis of the two women mentioned in the light of major concerns of feminist and women's studies such as power structures and power relations with focus laid on the concept of patriarchy, objectification of women, sexism, gender stereotyping, double standard and violence against women.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, objectification, sexism, gender stereotype, double standard, violence

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Over the years, around the world, women have often been subjugated, oppressed and subjected to violence of various kinds. Feminism is a social and activist movement which has made a strenuous effort to erase gender inequalities. When feminism extended into the theoretical and philosophical framework, feminist theory came into being. Women's studies has its roots in feminism. It was simmering beneath the surface during the first and second wave of feminism. Bonnie G. Smith quotes a South Korean researcher who says,

"Women's Studies grew out of the recognition of the gross inequities in women's lived experiences and through an accumulation of academic disciplines exploring these problems" (9).

Women's Studies is an academic discipline which attained impetus in the late 1960's and early 1970's. According to Smith, "Women's Studies brings all of women's experiences under the scholarly microscope" (1). The California State University in San Diego is usually credited to have begun the first Women's Studies program in 1969.

*Feminist Studies* published in 1972 is the first scholarly Women's Studies journal.

Women's Studies often lean on feminist pedagogy and it strives to research and critique the power structures and the social inequalities on the basis of gender which in turn relates to race, class ethnicity and the like. It has its focus on works by women or about women and embraces literature, history, philosophy, anthropology, psychology and other disciplines. The initial concerns posed by scholars like Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, Marx and Engels who argued the inequality that women faces through a socialist study of women's condition, laid the foundation for further studies in Women's Studies.

Indira Goswami who has adopted the pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami was a writer, poet, editor and activist from Assam, India. Although she has written in both Assamese and English many of her prominent novels were written originally in Assamese and later translated into English. She has many novels to her credit including *The Blue-Necked Braja*, *The Rusted Sword*, *Pages stained with blood*, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker* which was turned into a film which won many awards, *The Man from Chinnamasta*, *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* and many more. She has written a few anthologies of short stories and poetry and her autobiography is titled *An Unfinished Autobiography*. She is the recipient of several awards including Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for *The Rusted Sword*, Assam Sahitya Sabha Award in 1988, Bharat Nirman Award in 1989, Katha National Award for Literature in 1993, Jnanpith Award in 2001, Padma Shri which she refused to accept in 2002, Principal Laurate Prince Claus Award in 2008 and Asom Ratna in 2009.

*Chinnamastar Manuhto* by Indira Goswami, translated as *The Man from Chinnamasta* by Prashant Goswami is a novel published in the year 2005. Set in 1920's that is pre- independence India, the novel has the Kamakhya temple at the centre of its narrative. It is a plea on the part of the author to stop the age old practice of animal sacrifice at the temple. The novel met with a lot of resistance especially on the part of conservatives and Goswami

had to even face death threats. The novel revolves around Chinnamasta Jatadhari, an ascetic and a learned man, who along with Ratnadhar, an artist and his favourite disciple, and a host of followers strive to put an end to animal sacrifice by gathering enough signatures in support of the cause to submit to the British authorities. Goswami quotes from the *Kalika Purana* to present alternative offerings for animal sacrifice.

Brilliantly woven into the narrative are the stories of two women- Dorothy Brown, a foreigner who seeks refuge with the jatadhari and Bidhibala, the child bride. Dorothy Brown is the wife of Henry Brown who is the Principal of the Cotton College. The year Dorothy was away to get treatment to have children, Henry Brown began a relationship with a Khasi woman and impregnated her. Dorothy decides to leave her husband after finding numerous letters addressed to the woman. She seeks out the jatadhari to attain peace of mind. She stays at the Dharbanga House which was earlier used as a shelter by wandering ascetics and becomes a disciple of the jatadhari. She connects with the jatadhari in an unusual manner and she puts it to words thus, "I shall be your shadow forever. Our relationship cannot be defined. It is a very special bond" (Goswami 174). An attempted rape of Dorothy prompts the jatadhari to move her away from Chinnamasta for a few weeks. After she returns she is shot to death and it is implied that her own husband is the murderer.

Bidhibala is initially introduced to the reader through the memory of Ratnadhar who was mesmerized by her when she was brought for Kumari Puja. Ever since then he has been waiting for her to return to Chinnamasta. She finally arrives, for the buffalo sacrifice, as a eleven year old child betrothed to a forty year old man who has a wife and two daughters. Her heart is wrenched and troubled and she is disgusted by the man she is about to marry but her father Singhadatta is beyond reason. She confides in Ratnadhar and pleads with him to help the buffalo, who is brought to sacrifice for her, escape. Ratnadhar gives in and the fact that the buffalo has gone missing enrages Singhadatta. Knowing that Ratnadhar who is opposed to animal sacrifice is behind this, he threatens him, and

declares that he would bring two buffaloes for sacrifice in the place of one even if he has to sell his land to buy them. Bidhibala runs away from home and seeks shelter with a group of prostitutes. Though they did not force her into their trade she refuses to take food or water and succumbs to a pitiful death.

Indira Goswami explores power structure and power relations through the stories of Dorothy and Bidhibala. Empowerment is "the process of gaining access and developing one's capacities with a view to participating actively in shaping one's own life" ([www.eduhi.at](http://www.eduhi.at)> 100- words for equality). It implies making choices confidently, standing firm on one's own authority in a self-determinant manner. After flipping through the first few pages of the novel, the readers are introduced to Dorothy Brown who seeks out the jatadhari in search of "peace of mind" (13). After she comes to know about her husband's infidelity she resolutely takes the decision to move into an ancient building, the Darbhanga House, away from her husband. In the middle of nowhere the place lacks security and comfort.

The faithful munshi Vepin helps Dorothy to settle in and he pleads with her to let an old servant Parashuram, whom Henry Brown had sent, to stay with her in case she is in need at any time. But Dorothy makes herself absolutely clear, "From now on, I have nothing whatsoever to do with your master. I shall decide what is best for my own welfare and honour. I will send Parashuram back in the morning. Tell your master he is never to try and visit me again" (20). Goswami has portrayed Dorothy as a strong and confident woman, not willing to be suppressed by authority embodied not just by her husband but by others also. Many of the jatadhari's followers were not pleased about him taking Dorothy as his disciple. They kept probing him thus, "O Reverend One, the English woman's presence is causing much distress... ask her to leave" (54). But Dorothy stood up firmly and said "I have come here of my own free will. No one can ask me to leave"(55). She has confidently made a choice to leave her husband and to shape her own future. In the silence that followed "all eyes were on Dorothy's retreating back. Nobody had ever heard a white woman speak this way" (55). An empowered woman

doesn't mean that she is fearless but she is ready to face her fears and move on as she takes responsibility of her own life.

Central to the idea of power structure in women's experience is the concept of patriarchy. It is an unjust social system that favours men giving them full authority over women and children. Patriarchy describes the "society in which we live today, characterized by current and historic unequal power relations between women and men whereby women are systematically disadvantaged and oppressed" ([londonfeministnetwork.org.uk](http://londonfeministnetwork.org.uk)).

Patriarchy is powerfully depicted through the poignant life of Bidhibala. Though she is only eleven she is forcibly betrothed to a forty year old married man taking into consideration the wishes of his extremely temperamental and conservative father, Singhadatta, alone. She doesn't have a say in it nor her mother, "Her mother had retorted, "The man's hair and beard are already turning grey. Even those brahmins from Coochbehar were better." "Shut up!" Her mother could speak no more." (94). Her father's decision had to be unquestioningly accepted by the rest of the family. Both Bidhibala and her mother are made subservient by the dominating father figure.

Considering or treating a person, usually a woman, as a mere object who does not have thought or feeling is called objectification and when it occurs in the realm of sex it is termed specifically as sexual objectification. Martha Nussbaum has identified seven features and three more features have been added by Rae Langton when it comes to objectification:

Instrumentality: the treatment of a person as a tool for the objectifier's purpose; Denial of autonomy: the treatment of a person as lacking in autonomy and self-determination; Inertness: the treatment of a person as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity; Fungibility: the treatment of a person as interchangeable with other objects; Violability: the treatment of a person as lacking in boundary-integrity; Ownership: the treatment of a person as something that is owned by another (can be bought or sold); Denial of subjectivity: the treatment of a

person as something whose experiences and feelings(if any) need not be taken into account; Reduction to body: the treatment of a person as identified with their body, or body parts; Reduction to appearance: the treatment of a person primarily in terms of how they look, or how they appear to the senses; Silencing: the treatment of a person as if they are silent, lacking the capacity to speak (<https://plato.stanford.edu>)

Both Bidhibala and Dorothy are presented to the readers through the eyes of other characters in the novel. During Bidhibala's Kumari Puja, Shambu priest is seen arguing with two other devotees. There was a rumour that she had already attained her puberty;" "The girl seems to have crossed her twelfth birthday. Let's check her hands, feet and chest."

"She has breasts!"

"She must have reached puberty.""(47)

It is noteworthy that this conversation occurs while Bidhibala is seated in the dais amongst them. She is silenced and is reduced to just her body and body parts alone according to Langton's theory of objectification. Nussbaum's theory of ownership is also manifested in her. A child bride, she is treated as an object that can be bought or sold. Her father is willing to give her away to a married man with two daughters because the groom is "very rich"(94). She was presented in front of him and "he had blurted, "Oh how beautiful you are. Like an angel" " (94). She is denied any autonomy and is treated as a tool for the groom's purpose which is nothing but sexual gratification and a male heir.

Dorothy's treatment by others is no different. Her determination to leave her husband is misinterpreted as lack of integrity (violability according to Nussbaum). Men have forbidden their wives from even talking to her and her own husband calls her a slut and "mother of all whores" (35). She is also discussed in terms of her body. A hermit from Torsa says, "he (jatadhari) will disrobe this white devotee... In know. He will have to touch her yoni for his experiments..." (16). Soon after she has settled in the Darbhanga House many men including the hermit from Torsa are seen lurking around the house day in and day out and a few have even taken

the trouble of climbing trees to get a glimpse of her. She is not considered as somebody with a capability to think or feel that is she is denied subjectivity. Her private life becomes a public affair and spikes the curiosity of many men. They are dying to know, "what did she [did] behind those shuttered windows?" (29).

A discrimination or prejudice that is fostered on the basis of one's sex is sexism. This is usually directed towards women through either actions or words. Two kinds of sexism has been identified- hostile and benevolent sexism. Melanie Tannenbaum says that "hostile sexism is what most people think of when they picture "sexism"- angry, explicitly negative attitudes towards women"([https:// scientificamerican.com](https://scientificamerican.com)). It was Peter Glick and Susan Fiske who brought in the concept of benevolent sexism. Tannenbaum quotes them:

We define benevolent sexism as a set of interrelated attitudes toward women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles but that are subjectively positive in feeling tone( for the perceiver) and also tend to elicit behaviours typically categorized as prosocial(e.g., helping) or intimacy-seeking (e.g., self-disclosure).

([https:// scientificamerican.com](https://scientificamerican.com))

Henry Brown, Dorothy's husband pays a visit at the Darbhanga House soon after she settles in there. He calls out to a Dorothy who is unwilling to even come out of the house thus:

Dorothy... I've come to take you home my dear. You can't live here like this... Dorothy... Dorothy... Damn these mosquitoes! You'll die of cholera. I've come to take you home. Let's go, darling. Dorothy, listen to me. This is not a place for you. They're different; these people please try and understand. (34)

Brown considers Dorothy's decision to live in this building away from him, quite absurd and believes that as a woman she cannot survive there all by herself. His words seem to have been said to invoke a positive feeling in Dorothy and he seems to be lending a helping hand to her. These words of

cajoling portray benevolent sexism which soon turns into hostile sexism when he barks "Come on out you stupid cow!" (35). His whole attitude becomes abusive as he grabs her hand and shouts "The buggy's waiting Dorothy. Stop this nonsense and let's go" (35) and goes on to call her a slut and a whore.

Closely allied to the concept of sexism are gender stereotyping and double standard. Gender stereotype is "a generalised view or preconception about attributes or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by, or roles that are or should be performed by women and men" ([www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org)). Women are usually expected to be passive, shy and submissive and thrust into certain domestic roles. Double standard is "a set of principles that applies differently and usually more rigorously to one group of people or circumstances than to another; especially a code of morals that applies more severe standards of sexual behaviour to women than men" ([bellebrita.com](http://bellebrita.com)).

The time period that the novel is set in is the 1920's when woman were completely restricted on the basis of their gender. Dorothy broke free from the gender stereotype when she decided to leave her husband. This decision came as a slap in the face of Henry Brown (35). People vehemently judge her saying "she's ruining her life" (46), little do they realize that her life has already been ruined and all that she is trying to do is heal the past wounds. Even though the injustice done to her is huge she as a woman is expected to be passive and unquestioningly stay with her husband. But Dorothy broke those shackles with her decision.

The injustice done to Bidhibala is no different. Her father as the authoritative voice has taken the decision to marry off the eleven year old to a forty year old married man. He describes the groom thus, "A respectable landowner from Bangara. Has wife and two daughters. No son. That's why he wants to marry again. Very rich" (94). As an eleven year old child she becomes a bride who is to be soon shoved into the role of a wife. As expected of a woman she is too soon bear a son and raises a family of her own. As a girl, a woman, she is forced to be submissive and conform to the norms laid out in front of her without raising her voice. She is

denied education and forced to soontake up the roles of a loving wife and nurturing mother. Her pathetic state is mirrored in the calf that has been brought for sacrifice for her- "suddenly she could see the predatory face of the grey haired man to whom she would soon be married. He had shared the same bed with another woman. She would not say..." (102). Bidhibala empathizes with the calf who like her is soon to face its fate.

When Dorothy Brown stayed away from her husband for a year, Henry Brown started a relationship with a native woman. She is impregnated by him and Dorothy comes to know about this relationship after finding letters, photographs and drawings that were kept hidden by Henry Brown. Nowhere in the novel do we find anybody raising a question against this infidelity committed by Henry Brown or the injustice done to Dorothy. But as soon as Dorothy moves into the Darbhanga House, Henry Brown is quick to accuse Dorothy of a relationship with jatadhari- "So that rascal's pit a spell on you. You slut! Mother of all whores! That's what you came for? To fornicate with that godman fellow?"(35).

After staying away from Chinnamastafor a while with the jatadhari, news about Dorothy's pregnancy reaches the shores of Brahmaputra even before Dorothy returns. The topic was discussed among the natives and the white men. At the time of Dorothy's arrival a large number of white men gathered at the shore. People wondered "but what had brought this assortment of white men to this particular place at this particular time?"(161). The answer to that question became quite clear soon "Was Dorothy carrying the jatadhari's child? Apparently the white men had come up here to find out the truth"(165). The adultery committed by Henry Brown is kept under the wraps but Dorothy as a woman is forced to face a number of inquisitive people. It is implied that she was finally gunned down by her own husband.

Down the ages women have been subjected to different kinds of abuse including physical assault and the cruelest being sexual violence. It is usually an expression of power and supremacy from the part of men and a show of their masculinity. The attempted rape of Dorothy is an

example. Alone at the Darbhanga House she is sexually harassed. After the failed attempt to identify the culprits at the police station, she reveals to her friend Willaim Smith that her husband Henry Brown is behind the rape. Her leaving him was seen as an act of rebellion and thus a challenge of Brown's power. The rape attempt is his reaction to this rebellion and he takes it to the extreme when he murders her brutally.

Likewise Bidhibala also once stood up to her father to voice out her concerns , "You cannot get buffaloes. You will not bring buffaloes. I shall not marry a man already..."(121). She didn't even get to finish the sentence when "Singhadatta, furious at his daughter's audacity, lost control and threw his khadu, the wooden slipper he was wearing at her." The assault doesn't end there. "...without a word he grabbed her hair and began to kick her viciously...Bidhibala's grandmother was screaming. "You will kill her! She's only a child"..."(123). When Singhadatta felt his supremacy being challenged he violently responded to it by indulging in physical assault. Bidhibala finally ran away from home, from her fate, only to die pathetically. Ratnadhar rightly mourns her thus, "Bidhibala, they made a sacrifice of you instead of the buffalo" (156).

As a woman writer, writing about the experiences of women, Indira Goswami has carved for herself a unique place. Malashri Lal has rightly pointed out that "The common thread in Indira Goswami's immensely diverse and rich oeuvre is the concern for women. In her person and in her work this is echoed multifariously. Despite the complex interstices, I see no contradictions—only a holistic expression of India's many challenges to women's empowerment and a gifted writer moulding them into creative forms" ([www.indiragoswami.com](http://www.indiragoswami.com)). In *The Man from Chinnamasta* Goswami has powerfully depicted two women- Dorothy, a white woman and Bidhibala, an Indian child bride.A study of these two characters with focus on the concept of patriarchy, objectification, sexism, gender stereotyping, double standard and violence against women portray that though from two different countries and a considerable age gap between them their experiences as women are no different.

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