

Human Sensibility in the Short Stories of Indira Goswami : A Critical Analysis

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Abstract. Indira Goswami occupies an important place in literature. Her short stories have varied themes which range from nineteen thirties to the present time. Her stories have universality. They deal with the harsh social reality. Dr. Goswami wielded the pen not only to highlight the matters of violence but also took the initiative to persuade the banned ULFA to come to the negotiating table. Her stories give rare insights into the human life and predicament. The agony of her life created in her a deep rooted sympathy for humanity at large. The present paper studies the human sensibility in her short stories.

Keywords : Melancholy; thwarted passion; agony; pathos; angst; metamorphosis.

The noted writer Indira Goswami has successfully explored the rules and the designs working behind the great phenomenon of this universe. Her books epitomize the results of her masterly explorations. Her achievements have become a matter of pride for every Assamese woman. She was an Assamese editor, poet, professor, scholar and writer. Emerging as a short story writer, Goswami has of late come to the limelight for a number of novels. She has over twenty five novels and hundreds of short stories to her credit. *Chenabor Sot* (1972, *The Stream of Chenab*), *Mamare Dhara Tarowal* (1980, *The Rusted Sword*), *Nilakanthi Braja* (1976, *Blue-Necked Braja*), *Dontal Hatir Une Khowada Howdah* (1986, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of The Tusker*), *Tez Aru Dhulire Dhusarita Pristha* (1995, *Pages Soiled with Blood and Dust*), *Nangotha Shahar* (*Naked City*) are her famous novels.

As a writer of short stories, she is an outstanding figure from the North-East. The region of Kamrup is the background of most of her stories. The stories constitute a world which reflects the contemporary ugly realities and unrest. The stories have multiple themes, in a time frame, which range from the nineteen thirties to the modern times. They are marked by the universality of their appeal. Unfulfilled love forms the core of several of these stories. The melancholy of unfulfilled love lends poignancy to these tales. One is struck by a deep sense of freshness and novelty at every subsequent reading of her short stories.

Thwarted passion finds expression in most unusual form of the vengeance in 'Under the Shadow of Kamakhya'. A woman is driven to madness in 'To Break a Begging Bowl'. These tales embody the degeneration of humanity as in 'The Offspring' where the Brahmin prostitute would rather murder her unborn child than bear it, since it is fathered by her low-caste lover. The theme appears prominently in the story 'The Beasts' where in the imaginative world of the speechless protagonist human beings turn into

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animals. Temple Kamakhya is devoted to goddess Parvati. Scriptures tell us that when Parvati committed suicide following the humiliation inflicted on Shiva by her father Daksha, the agonised Shiva carried her body around the three worlds. To bring him out of his grief Vishnu cut the body in many pieces. One of these pieces, the yoni fell on Kamagiri near Guwahati. With the passage of time the spot became the sacred place of Kamakhya. The blood of animals is used to propitiate the goddess as part of Tantric worship. Associated with the temple is the river Brahmaputra, which weaves its meandering course through the stories - at times a powerful presence, at others shadowy.

In all the stories, Goswami enthrals one with the charming descriptions of her land and people. The minute details of the birds, the flora and fauna are vividly described with the flourish of a poet. The character absorbs the ambience of the landscape. The stories deal with the pain and agony of human life in poignant manner. Goswami never shirks from the bitter truths. In the story 'The Offspring' the brahmin prostitute Damayanti finds it impossible to own her son from a low caste father. The following words epitomize her agony caused by the social mores:

Damayanti became frantic. She shouted furiously.
 'What will you get there?' Yes, I have buried it.
 (*Shadow*, 30)

Another story "The Empty Chest" has a significant title. The word 'chest' has two meanings - the heart and the coffin. Toradoi loses her lover but she wishes to continue with his memory and his empty coffin. But when people's greedy eyes fall on the coffin, she has to dispense with it. She is left only with an empty heart.

The most powerful story is no doubt the one named in the title, "Under the Shadow of Kamakhya" where the main character Padmapriya is sent back to her parents' home when her husband's family wrongly suspects that she has an incurable disease. The husband finally comes back to take her home and at this moment of glory of accepting her back he is shocked to know about the strands in his wife's life during the two years of his absence.

"The Beast" is about the unpredictability of people, the capitulation of a principled man who sells his trust among a Rubha tribes woman to an unscrupulous but powerful merchant. The story is narrated through a mute character. It is a story of betrayal. A slice of life is presented in each of her stories. In 'Parasu's Well' a greedy Kabuliwallah moneylender melts when he sees the hard work put in by the dull, almost wretched character of Parasu, and the sad condition of his sick brother. She displays her mastery over the craft of the short story that would rank her with some of the best in the world today :

They also bring out the concerns of this extremely talented writer and illustrate the enduring place for realism. (Wikipedia)

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In "The Journey" Goswami most skillfully weaves the personal story of an emancipated tea shop owner and his family in the background of the liberation struggle for Assam led by the ULFA. One of her major achievements was 'bringing the Government of India and the militant outfit United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) to the negotiation table'. (Baruah, 9)

Writing under the shadow of the three decade long insurgency in Assam Goswami wielded the pen not only to highlight the issue of violence but also to persuade the banned ULFA to come to the negotiating table. She authored several novels, short story collections and scholarly treatises reflecting the angst and pain of people from varied backgrounds whose sufferings have deprived them of basic dignity and respect that all deserve. She took the initiative of setting up the Peoples' Consultative Group (PCG) in 2003. Her efforts may not have yielded immediate results but they definitely paved the way for the ongoing talk process between a group of ULFA leaders and the government.

Her sensibilities incorporate Nature within their fold. In her short stories she presents a slice of life in the background of the tapestry of Nature. Her view of literature is much broader than those of several of her contemporaries. Her stories fascinate the reader with kaleidoscopic pictures of the people and the scenes of her land. These are marked by the touches of a poetic hand. The two major things which occupy central position in her stories are the Brahmaputra river and the Kamakhya temple. The title story narrates the plight of a woman who falls victim to her suspicious husband. When the husband comes to know about his wife's life during his two years absence his sense of glory is deeply shocked. The story "The Chest" is a sad commentary on the caste - ridden Indian society. The protagonist finally puts the wooden chest to fire lamenting the fact that her love could not marry her due to the arbitrary caste barriers raised by the cruel society. The story "Dwarika and His Gun" is slightly different as it provides ample scope to the readers for his free play of imagination.

In several of her stories she reaches the heights of the noted short story writers like O' Henry, Leo Tolstoy and Maupassant. Like these writers she exhibits not only a deep understanding of the human psychology but also an approach that embraces humanity at large, specially the suffering lot. This kind of approach raises her level beyond the narrow limits of time and place. The following lines from the Blurb point to this rare merit of the short story writer:

A humanist to the core, she is touched to see all kinds of afflictions suffered by humanity. But she believes that for most of his afflictions man himself is to blame and, hence, he can only set things right. (Paul, Blurb)

Thus, Goswami is not a writer sitting in an 'ivory tower'. She has tasted life to the full. The varied shades of life are reflected in her works. Every story epitomizes this process of metamorphosis and therein lies the secret of her greatness and everlasting reputation.

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