

Women, Nature and Narration: A Study of Ecofeminism in Indira Goswami's *The Man from Chinnamasta*

Shipra Singh

Research Scholar

Department of English and MEL

University of Lucknow.

Abstract

The paper attempts to portray an important aspect of ecofeminism that is animal sacrifice. People sacrifice goats, buffaloes and ducks in the temple premise in the name of cultural practice. They blindly believe that by sacrificing these innocent animals they may get the blessings of the Goddess and will be cured of diseases. Weaving such a sensitive issue is not an easier task for a writer. Indira Goswami, through her novel *The Man from Chinnamasta* tries to question the readers, whether sacrificing innocent animals in the name of religion is right? Whether treating women worse than animals in the name of patriarchy is praiseworthy? The critical investigation of *The Man from Chinnamasta* from an ecofeminist perspective illuminates the problems associated with ecology and women. The ecofeminist discourse is driven by more pragmatic and ethical considerations than mere textual analysis. The paper is an attempt to analyze the age old tradition of animal sacrifice and sufferings of women in a male dominated society. Goswami's novel explores the boundaries of eco-feminism.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, patriarchy, animal sacrifice, feminism, nature.

Ecofeminism is a multidisciplinary intellectual and political movement which came into existence in the 1980s. It is the yoking together of environment related issues and feminism. It assumes that both nature and femininity have been dominated by man. The reason behind the identity politics of feminism is that man exploits both women and nature. Therefore, the common target of the discourse on nature and women is patriarchy. Ecofeminism, a neologism, was coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne, a French feminist and science fiction writer, in 1974. Her fundamental intention in writing her path-breaking work *Le Féminisme ou la mort* (Feminism or Death) was to give a call to women to save the planet. Later, this discipline evolved as a theory by the contribution of various eco-feminists. The main concern of ecofeminism is to solve the problems of women and nature but nearly a decade ago there was a significant development in this field. According to Professor Gaard, animal studies and naturalized epistemology added a new perspective to ecological crisis by theorizing interspecies relations. The animal studies address interspecies or gender justice called animal ecofeminism. It is important for us to consider animal world in the domain of ecofeminism.

This paper attempts to analyse Indira Goswami's *The Man from Chinnamasta* from two ecofeminist stances: the position of women in orthodox patriarchal society, and abolition of thousands of years old ritual of animal sacrifice in the temple. The novel depicts the heart-rending agony of animal sacrifice in the name of tradition and religion in the Kamakhya temple.

It speaks against a thousand year old ritual of animal sacrifice at the Kamakhya temple. The novel can be read from three different perspectives. First, the basic concern of the protagonist (Chinnamasta Jatadhari) is to stop animal sacrifice at any cost. He even starts a signature campaign with Ratnadhar to stop animal sacrifice in the temple. On the basis of his knowledge of Hindu scriptures specially *Kalikapurana*, he suggests people that the Devi can even be satiated by flowers. Secondly, on the contrary, the tantriks, the purohits, and the priests of the temple believe staunchly in animal sacrifice to worship the goddess. At an instance the tantrik says that, "A buffalo's blood quenches the goddess thirst for one hundred years" (Goswami 93). Thirdly, a white British woman Dorothy Brown, whose husband falls in love with a woman of Khasi tribe and has an illegitimate child, breaks her marital bond with Mr. Brown. Dorothy becomes a disciple of Jatadhari to attain peace. Another important aspect of the novel is Bidhibala, the daughter of Singhdatta Sarma, who sacrifices her own life to save her buffalo.

The animal sacrifice in *The Man from Chinnamasta* is the central thread of the novel. It is in the form of vignettes which seems disjointed but gives a kaleidoscopic view of various rituals and activities of the temple. This novel aims to create awareness against animal sacrifice and condition of women under patriarchy. Goswami weaves the novel with her own personal experience and subject matter as Malaya Khaund in her book *Indira Goswami: a Critical Study of her Writings* (2003) says, "The greatness of a novel lies mainly on two points- authenticity and familiarity of the subject matter... All her novels are product of intimate personal experience and familiarity of the subject matter" (Khaund 1). The personal ethos can be seen in her autobiography- *An Unfinished Autobiography*. It is interesting to note an anecdote, when Goswami's mother consults an astrologer to know her horoscope for marriage and the astrologer predicts that her horoscope was not good. To get rid of bad stars her mother decides to sacrifice a goat to the goddess Vagala, who resides on the top of the Kamakhya hills. The animal sacrifice which happened in front of her eyes marked a deep scar on her heart.

The novel depicts Assamese culture through various characters. However, Chinnamasta Jatadhari is Goswami's mouthpiece, whose fervent appeal is to save animals from man's selfish motive. Those who support animal sacrifice in the novel are the hermits and tantriks of the village Torsa, Singhdatta Sarma, Haladhar Purohit and Shambhu Sikdar, whose job was to behead the animals for sacrifice. The hermit from village Torsa comes to Kamakhya temple once in a year during Ambubachi celebration when temple is closed for four days because it is believed that the goddess goes through her menstrual cycle during that time. The hermit's inhuman attitude is revealed through the suffering of the animal, "The sound of buffalo hooves rose over the verbal duel between the Jatadhari and the hermit. The animal tried to break free as it was being hauled away to the slaughterhouse. It wanted to escape the death that came in the form of pilgrims. But the harbinger of doom kept tugging at it. Shoving. Yelling, Prodding" (Goswami 15). The hermit is a staunch supporter of animal sacrifice. He is against Jatadhari's protest march in which many people joined the rally and signed the memorandum against animal sacrifice. The hermit hated this initiative of Jatadhari. At an instance, he says, "The curse of Chinnamasta Devi will blast you to oblivion. Your endeavors 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 alter” (Goswami 55). The tantrik beheads the head of a goat in a single stroke of machete and smears his forehead with the hot blood as well as licks it. The tantric is quite dissatisfied with protest by Jatadhari to stop animal sacrifice. He says, “This is the first sacrifice in three days. The mother is thirsty. Come, paint your foreheads with this blood. Listen to me. Stab the man from Chinnamasta who tries to rob the Mother of her share of blood. Who will volunteer to stab him! Speak up!” (Goswami 93). Furthermore, the tantrik even narrates the history of king Rudrasingha, who sacrifices thousands of buffaloes for his prosperity. The story of Rudrasingha indicates that animal sacrifice is not new in premise of Kamakhya temple but it has been passed from generation to generation in the name of tradition.

Another character named Haladhar purohit becomes furious when he comes to know that a devotee is not ready to sacrifice the buffalo. He exhibits his anger in loud voice saying, “Scoundrels! 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. The blood of a black bull or a boar appeases her for twelve years” (Goswami 81). Then, Shambhu Sikadar, whose job is to behead animals for sacrifice, is quite proud of his job. He practices for his proficiency on the bank of Bramhaputra river. His indifferent attitude towards animal and pride of his profession is portrayed through his answer to the question of Ratnadhar, “I know! My father said that you have beheaded two thousand buffaloes” then he answered, “Two thousand and thirty” (Goswami 89). Another instance of animal sacrifice in the name of religious superstition is apparent in Singhdatta Sarma, the father of Bidhibala. He sacrificed a buffalo when Bidhibala’s brother was ill. But, unfortunately, her brother did not survive. Now Singhadatta Sarma wants to sacrifice a buffalo for Bidhibala’s marriage. The proud patriarchal feeling of Singhadutta Sarma is clearly visible when 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...” (Goswami 120). Every day he massages the buffalo’s neck with butter so that her head would be severed in a single stroke. He wants to sacrifice the buffalo at any cost. Singhadutta becomes furious when he comes to know that Bidhibala had freed the buffalo. He grabs Bidhibala by her hair and kicks her angrily.

Goswami has interwoven the stories of two leading women characters in the novel. Dorothy Brown is a foreigner who seeks help from Jatadhari to attain peace of life and Bidhibala is on the verge of becoming child bride. Bidhibala’s father, Singhadatta Sarma has fixed her with a man of age forty years who already have two wives. During Bidhibala’s kumara puja, Shambhu priest argues with two other 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” (Goswami 47). This reflects an insight into the awful and shameful thought of orthodox patriarchy. Bidhibala does not want to get married with this old man neither she wants the sacrifice of a buffalo which her father has promised to do. Here, the buffalo becomes the sufferer as animal cannot speak but Bidhibala seems to be a mute sufferer although she can speak. This clearly depicts the oppression of both women and animal by patriarchy. Looking at the painting of dead girls suspected to be spies who had cast a spell on king who were crushed to death between bamboo poles painted by Ratnadhar,

Bidhibala amusedly says, “What difference was there between sacrificial animals and women?” (Goswami 99). The painting definitely shows the plight of women during the time of king Rudrasingha reign. Bidhibala liked Ratnadhar and Ratnadhar liked her even more. Bidhibala’s heart bleeds with the thought of the sacrifice of the buffalo for her marriage. The pain becomes unbearable for her and she runs away from home to seek 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.

Goswami has portrayed Dorothy Brown as very strong, empowered and confident woman. She is neither suppressed by authority nor by her husband who is the principal of the prestigious Cotton College. She decides to live alone in the Darbhanga House and become Jatadhari’s follower. Living alone in the Darbhanga House she was sexually harassed: “Two ruffians pounced on her, ripping open her nightgown. Before Dorothy even knew it, her sensibilities were violated” (Goswami 67). Although her husband had affair with a khasi woman in her absence and even had an illegitimate child but Dorothy’s determination to leave her husband is misinterpreted as lack of integrity. When her husband Henry Brown comes to take her with him, she strongly denies. Mr. Brown could not hold his anger and he exploded: “The buggy’s waiting Dorothy. Stop this nonsense and let’s go. He grabbed at her hand as she tried to shut the window... So that rascal’s put a spell on you. You slut! Mother of all whores! That’s what you came for?” (Goswami 35). These lines reflect that Henry brown’s attitude towards Dorothy is quite abusive and disrespectful. Being a self-empowered woman Dorothy broke the shackles of gender stereotype by deciding to live alone. But living alone also did not provide Dorothy her peace of mind. Soon people started predicting that she is pregnant with Jatadhari’s child. Being a women she is always questioned and seen with suspicion where as her husband roams about freely even after committing adultery.

One of the most important ecofeminist perspectives of the novel is the portrayal of women as saviour of nature. Bidhibala sacrifices her own life in order to save her buffalo’s life and herself from getting married. She treated her buffalo not as a mere animal but acted like a foster mother. She usually pats her buffalo with her hand and gently wipes its back with her anchal. Bidhibala knew that Ratnadhar and Jatadhari are working for the abolition of animal sacrifice, so she requested Ratnadhar to release her buffalo whom she called ‘Mena’. She says, “Please let this buffalo go so I won’t have to watch it being sacrificed. I haven’t slept for nights at the thought . I’ve seen it grow up, seen its grey tufts turn black. When I bring her food and call ‘Mena’ she runs up to me. I can show you now” (Goswami 104). Dorothy Brown always strives to abolish animal sacrifice by supporting Ratnadhar and allowing him to work in her house for signature campaign. Ratnadhar has started a signature campaign and he collects the signatures and thumb impressions of those who support to stop animal sacrifice. Then there is an old woman whose strong reaction against animal sacrifice is clearly visible in the text. When she watches the sacrifice of animals, she throws herself on the sacrificial altar and says, “A little while ago it was eating grass and leaves. Why did you kill the helpless soul? It was alive. O you blood-thirsty goddess, take my head as well” (Goswami 93). Apart from women, men also show concern for

animals. The eponymous character, Chinnamasta Jatadhari and Ratnadhar continuously make effort to stop animal sacrifice. Ratnadhar's regret and hostility to animal sacrifice is at its zenith, when he comes to know that Bidhibala sacrificed her life to save the buffalo. Both Jatadhari and Ratnadhar act as saviour of nature and animal. Jatadhari has in-depth knowledge of scriptures. He makes people aware that the Goddess does not want to quench her thirst with the blood of animals. He says, "Read the seventy sixth chapter of the *Kalika Purana* that contains the rules and rituals of worship of the Goddess Shakti and promotes the *Vedas*" (Goswami 25). He suggests that the Goddess can be worshipped with karabi flowers. The entire novel reflects his protests against animal sacrifice. At the end novel, Jatadhari and his followers sacrifice their own blood and flesh on sacrificial alter of temple so that innocent animals could be saved in future.

In addition, the sixteenth century tantric text, the *Yogini Tantra* describes the ritual to perform Shakti worship in Kamakhya and the other sacred places of Kamrup. The text clearly mentions, "the status of flowers is higher than blood. The sacred texts state that the goddess is satiated for a hundred years with the blood of a single buffalo. The same writings also claim that an offering of one karabi flower can earn the devotee the virtues of the most arduous yagna, the Ashwamedha or horse sacrifice" (Goswami 129). By spreading awareness among people about the holy scriptures, Jatadhari and Ratnadhar strive to abolish the animal sacrifice in the temple premise. Thus, the paper attempts to portray an important aspect of eco-feminism that is animal sacrifice. People sacrifice many goats, buffaloes and ducks in the temple premise in the name of cultural practice. They blindly believe that by sacrificing these innocent animals they may get the blessings of the goddess and will be cured of diseases. Weaving such a sensitive issue is not an easier task for the writer. Indira Goswami through this novel tries to question the readers, whether sacrificing innocent animals in the name of religion is right? Whether treating women worse than animals in the name of patriarchy is praiseworthy? The critical investigation of *The Man from Chinnamasta* from an eco-feminist perspective thus illuminate the problems associated with ecology and women.

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