

MYTH AND RELIGION IN INDIRA GOSWAMI'S THE BLUE NECKED GOD

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Received: 19 Jan 2018

Accepted: 24 Jan 2018

Published: 27 Jan 2018

ABSTRACT

Indira Raisom Goswami, a writer who won Jnanapeeth award for her outstanding contribution to Literature, particularly Assamese, born in 1942 in Assam popularly known as Mamoni Baideo focused on her real life experiences to give birth to the phenomenal stories, fiction and poetry. She was also a political activist who tried to negotiate between government and militant groups of Assam. She refused Padma Sri in 2002 in this connection. She died in 2011. The Blue Necked God, published in 1976 originally written in Assamese as Neelkantha Braja was translated to English by Gayatri Bhattacharyya in 2013. The so called holy city of lord Krishna 'Brindavan' serves as the backdrop of the story. The pathetic condition of the widows is portrayed poignantly by the writer.

KEYWORDS: *Myth, Religion, Radheshamis, Purity and Pollution*

INTRODUCTION

The writings of women are generalized that they depict only the frustration of women. They deal only about the domestic violence. But there are women writers who raised questions not only on the false presumptions of Patriarchy and its oppressive nature, but also discussed the issues like myth, Religion, Philosophy and Politics. Indira Goswami is one among them who tried to portray the pathetic condition of women realistically in her novels. Of course, the Patriarchal domination takes the front seat, but at the same time, she explored the intrinsic structures of Myth and Religion which have almost become the part of human life. Myth is a thing which we cannot polemically deny. Sometimes, myth really strikes as a truth. The novel "The Blue Necked God" is about the faith of the people in religion. Hindu Religion is basically deep-rooted in myths. We have the assumptions like holy city, holy water, holy task etc. we deeply believe in purity and pollution. The notion of pollution is not only associated with the physical dirt, but also with the moral standards decided hegemonic ally by the elite class. Any cultural practice is indirectly associated with a traditional story which also consists of the way of life of a particular society. The dominant class has made it to acquire religious and spiritual significance. According to David Wiles, the Greek term "mythos" covers the entire spectrum of different meanings, from undeniable falsehoods to stories with religious and symbolic significance". The power relations of the society are mainly based on the cultural politics.

The so called shrewd and intellectual sect manipulates the emotions of the innocent and weak in the name of religion. They come with the stories which seem to be the verdict of God. Women are vulnerable to their hypocrisy and could be easily made victims. Hindu religion has laid down certain conditions to woman and she is not supposed to cross that 'Lakshmana Rekha', if she dares she will be punished according to the social norms which are more pathetic and

dangerous. Even the court laws are unable to protect them from the religious fangs. Indira Goswami in her novel *The Blue Necked God*

Saudamini, the protagonist of the novel is horrified to see the life of widows at Brindavan. She herself is a widow but very much confused with the orthodox rituals of her family. Her parents god-fearing Roychoudhury and Anupama takes her to the holy city thinking that a few years at Braj might change her mind and prepare her to face the reality of life but, paradoxically the reality of widows is also a myth and deeply religious. They are considered as ill omen and are not allowed to participate in any religious celebrations except singing Bhajans. In Brindavan they are called as Radheshyamias who live in the rooms administered by the temples called as Bhajan Ashram. They sing devotional songs and are paid a pittance. The head of the Ashram is Paanda who looks after the financial matters and supposed to take care of the dwellers. But he is more scrupulous and the writer refers to him as 'yamadoot' whenever a widow dies, he thoroughly searches for the gold ornaments or the money which was hidden by her. The body is not cremated properly if the other widows insist he shouts at them saying "Shut up! Shut up! I will send four men to remove the corpse. They will take the body and dump it in the Jamuna." (Bhattacharya 15). The administration is fully corrupt and the widows are victimized by these Paandas. The Brahmin widows from different cities come here in search of peace and intend to spend their last days in the holy city. Some young widows are forcibly driven here by their families. Charanbehari, a sort of tourist guide in Brindavan gives the picture of these widows, he remembers one incident of a group of young widows from Kummilla, Rajshashi and East Dinajpur, who had nothing to eat for many days and ready to do anything for food. Charanbehari used to go with lustful young men during those days and he says: "Like butchers examining animals before buying them, the young men would make these young widows strip off their clothes in order to examine their bodies thoroughly and make sure that they were without any blemishes" (Bhattacharya, 8)

When Saudamini arrives at the holy city, it was the month of August, which is the season of many festivities. The people from all over the country gathered there to celebrate Jhulan, RadhaAshtami etc. The sanyasis of various sects roaming the streets. The white dust has etched patterns on their faces and bodies. The rich people also visited the city the rich Sethjis distribute food and clothes for the beggars, again this is a religious myth that sinner will be redeemed of his sin by doing holy tasks like this. The devotee is not compassionate towards the wretched conditions of the poor but he is afraid of his sin and do not want to be punished. "Saudamini wanted to be familiar with the life of Brindavan, once she met a group of widows who lived in a small and dark dilapidated rooms. "They were grossly undernourished, and wore dirty and faded old dhotis." They sit at the gates of the Tortoise temple at Rangaji and beg; sometimes they sit in front of the temple throughout night hoping for the Malcha offerings". (Bhattacharya, 21). Anupama, Saudamini's mother is worried about the fate of her daughter she is visiting every temple and every sanyasi to seek the comfort and get the courage to look after her daughter, once they visit a Deoghari Baba from ManasSarovar who camped on the bank of river Jamuna, several devotees gathered there believed in the magic power of Baba they are desperate and in delusion thinking that baba has the power to redeem their grief. The Hindu Religion has various Religious gurus and Ashramas and people believe in them and sometimes totally surrender to them with unequivocal conditions, they only realize the cunningness and hypocrisy of them after being cheated. Anupama also prays for her daughter and when they are returning they heard two people talking of widows conditions in Braj they say this year Radheshamis are able to appease their hunger with water melons which are sold at 20 per one paisa he said, "some of them eat such large quantities of the fruit that they will sit on the steps of the crowded temples and die of indigestion and vomiting in full view of the pilgrims, and even as the dead bodies lie there

waiting to be cremated, two groups of those notorious body carriers will start fighting for the possessions of dead one some of their blows falling on the dead bodies too! The things that happen at Braj! And this is the holiest of holy places! The centre of the Universe". (Bhattacharya, 35) One can notice the tone of sarcasm here. During the Annakut festival more the 3,000 poverty-stricken widows come out to view the huge mountains of food made by the offerings of the devotees. There is a superstitious belief that if one witnesses this then they would be free from the pain of hunger throughout the year.

There are other characters in the novel who suffer because of the rituals. Shashiprova and Mrinalini both women are restless and destitute who struggle hard to live. Shashiprova is living with a temple priest Almgarhi and trying to protect her virginity. She has no other choice but to live with him she says, "There are many women like me in Braj. Who live with priests or paandas in the name of JugalUpaasana, worshipping the Divine as a couple? Women who have no one in the wide world to call their own, women who live in constant fear of their bleak futures". And Almgari is a eunuch and cannot harm her. After the break-up she really faces the hardship and starts roaming from place to place to live. Mrinalini after his father becomes bankrupt the responsibility of taking care of the old man rests on her shoulders and she pleads everyone to get the necessities of life. Saudamini even after sacrificing everything is not finding any peace, we assume time will heal every wound, but this is not possible in the case of widows every now and then they are reminded that they are dissolute women. At last she asks one old Radheshami "You cannot completely erase all memories of your husband from your mind. But now so many years have passed since he died. Tell me truly, have you never tried after all these years, to wipe away all thoughts and memories of him? And what about your physical hunger? Tell me the truth". (Bhattacharya, 167)

Saudamini wanted to get her life back, she is in love with a Christian man but again this is a myth that widows are not supposed to have the pleasures of life, they should spend their rest of life with a rigorous ritual practices then only they will get salvation. But this young widow is full of life with lots of dreams and hopes at the end Saudamini's father Roychoudhuri resolves his mind and ready to let go of his daughter with the Christian youth who dreams of leading her to a new and healthy path. When she meets that guy she becomes so happy and they just seemed as two pure flowers. "A poignantly sad cry of loneliness floated out from the heart of this tumult. A nameless sorrow tore her heart apart. Was this really what she wanted, she wondered again, exactly this?" But she is afraid of the society and people and decides to go back while returning she walked into the furious river with a question "Why? Why did this have to happen?" (Bhattacharya 182). Finally, she disappeared in the river only her white widow's cloth was found early in the morning, the writer uses a beautiful metaphor here the white chaddar, trampled under the feet of the crowds became a stone writing tablet of scandal mongering. The people started cook up the stories. The sad ending of the story suggests how difficult for a widow to live a decent and peaceful life because of the blind beliefs associated with Religion. We think that old customs and traditions have become obsolete nobody bothers about these now a day, but the imposition of the moral rules on women is returning back in the name of Hindutva and safeguarding of some rituals have become the priority of some associations they assumed the role of moral police. The people are debating whether it is harmful or not harmful to our society, anyways it is certainly curtailing the individual freedom and as usual women are the vulnerable victims. In an interview 'In Conversation with Sudeshna B. Baruah (updated Aug 04 2007 18:38 IST Hindustan Times.com) Goswami said "turning a widow myself at the age of 26, took me into the malpractices attached with widowhood like she has to keep away from men. From foods considered aphrodisiacs. My writings on widowhood and my raising a voice against its malpractices did bring about an attitudinal change towards the widows". It's really high time that the attitude of Indian

society towards widows should change, the humanity should be prior to Religion and the myths should be revisited, retold and deciphered in a new perspective.

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