

About the Pathos: A Reading of Indira Goswami's "Ode to Whore"**¹Trishna Deka, ²Sabina Begum**¹Research Scholar, Department of English Cotton University, Assam

Email: dekatrishna10@gmail.com

²Research Scholar, Department of Folklore Research Gauhati University, Assam

Email: shabeenabeg2017@gmail.com

Abstract:

The theme of the poem, "Ode to Whore" is self-evident. The title itself refers to the thematic concern of the poem. This poem is about the miserable conditions of life of the people socially entitled as 'whore'. Needless to mention that they are traditionally disrespected and dignity is a far-fetched adjective for them in most of the societies. In the traditional apprehension imposed upon them, the miseries they suffer from are looked down upon. The background that leads them to choose that profession and the dreadful consequences caused to them are lesser known matters for people. Endorsing a critical thrust to ponder over the rarely discussed topic, the poet addresses the veiled sorrows of the subject chosen for the poem. This paper attempts to discuss how the poet not only highlights but also dignifies the pathos of the subject chosen. The paper incorporates a line-to-line discussion of the poetic piece. To put forward an extensive illustration of the poem, this paper explains every stanza distinguishably with a highlight on the poetic devices used by the poet. It is noticeable that the poetic devices are not the mere ornamentation of the poem, rather these are well-attributed to emphasize upon the pivotal apprehensions. Even the form of the poem as an ode contributes to the illustration of the poem's argument. This paper endeavors a review of the poem with minute details.

Key Words: pathos, disrespect, poetic devices, sex workers.**1. Introduction:**

Indira Goswami was born in 1942 in Assam. Dr Goswami wrote under the pen name of Mamoni Raisom Goswami. She completed a successful career by being an editor, poet, professor and a prominent writer. She is a writer of many novels, short stories, poems, non-fictions and an autobiography. Her most-read novels include *The Blue-Necked God*, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, *Mamore Dhora Tarawal*, *Pages Stained with Blood*, *The Man from Chinnamasta*, *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* etc. To her credit go the famous short stories like 'Beasts', 'The Journey', 'Sanskar', 'To Break a Begging Bowl', 'Udaibhanur Charitra' etc. Her one and only poetry collection is *Pain and Flesh. An Unfinished Autobiography* is an autobiographical work of this writer. *Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra* is the non-fiction of Dr Goswami. She was awarded Sahitya Akademi for the novel *Mamore Dhora Tarawal*. Jnanapith Award was bestowed upon her in 2000. Thus, she becomes the first Assamese woman to achieve the award. She is also awarded Asom Ratna, the highest civilian award in the state of

Assam. Many works of this writer throw light in the lives of the marginalized sections of the society. Some works are loaded with feminist perspectives. *The Blue- Necked God* is a novel about the difficult lives of the Brahmin widows. *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of Tusker* is about different social issues of mid-20th century. This novel portrays Giribala as a protagonist showing the transitions in the Assamese society. Writing about her novels, Tilottoma Misra states (2011) in “Indira Goswami: brave, gentle and bold”:

“In most of her novels, the reader encounters women who are victims of social oppression, whose desires do not have social sanction, and consumed by the fire of unfulfilled desire, they are finally driven to self-destruction.” (p 29)

Thus, all her works are layered with meanings exposing the socio-cultural problems of the marginalized people. Her writings agreeably present the injustices come across by the protagonist. Her works have been researched upon by the scholars all over the nation in recent times. Some of her novels and short stories are included in the syllabus and suggested readings of English and Assamese literature and in the discipline of Women’s Studies.

The poem selected for this paper is one of the most significant literary works of the writer. The poem draws attention of the reader to the picture of the fraternity less talked about. The title of the poem itself is thought-provoking. ‘Ode’ is a genre of a poem, when addressed particularly elevates the status of the subject. An ode is a praise to the referred subject. It is used as an irony that a supposedly disrespected person of the society is addressed through the medium of an ode in the poem, ‘Ode to Whore.’ One can affirm that the poet has designed the poem, “Ode to Whore” in the form of a Romantic ode. M H Abrams (1999) writes in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*:

“Romantic poets perfected the personal ode of description and passionate meditation, which is stimulated by (and sometimes as its close reverts to) an aspect of the outer scene and turns on the attempt to solve either a personal emotional problem or a generally human one.” (p 198)

The ode discussed in this paper is also about the poet’s response to the acts of the subject chosen. Through the personal contemplation, the poet elaborates the opinions. This poem is the poet’s personal retort with the inner feelings for the sex workers. At the same time, it retains the humanistic perspective of the poet.

2. Discussion:

First stanza begins with a reference to the word ‘people’. The subject of the poem is aware that she is objectified through the gaze of the society. Hence, the poet expresses what she feels about the way people opine about her. The word ‘wine’ is used as a metaphor for the subject herself. She is so excellent in making wine that people taste it as vintage even when it is only one day old. The wine she prepares for the people makes everyone ‘frenzied’ and ‘wild’. Even she herself is ‘intoxicated’ preparing the wine. It means that she is also habituated to do the act. It is a kind of addiction now. It is the way she prepares wine actually works as a metaphor of love. By the

phrase 'fleshy breasts', the speaker means literally. It is treated like a flesh getting bereft of any bodily sensation. The metaphor of 'Dead River' is applied here to refer to the 'fleshy breast'. The way a dead river has no flow in it, the 'fleshy breasts' are also devoid of sensation. This metaphorical 'river' can be used as 'a sharp weapon' to make the people forsaken and frantic. The term like 'a sharp weapon' is again an irony. Although the speaker elevates her status throughout the stanzas gradually, but it gives the readers a scope to feel the pain reverberated behind. The wine metamorphosizes the speaker's pain. It turns the stone and ashes into songs. It means that her act of making love can turn everyone into an ecstatic mood. Her absence makes everyone to scream. They scream out of extreme despair. One can feel how ironical is her claim. People are desperate not to love her but to exploit her. But she claims again and again that she is desired with utmost excitement. Third stanza of the poem reveals her inner ache. The speaker opens up about the 'dark hall of sorrow'. She says that it is an 'agony' to get exploited through the mechanism of one's 'own flesh'. Such a claim is emphasized by one more irony:

"I have whipped my own flesh

and have drunk my own blood." (Goswami 6)

From the beginning, she keeps on explaining the joy of being the subject of craving for many. But these lines mentioned above clarify that the act of making love from her end is to whip one's own flesh. On the one hand, it is the elevation of one's own self; on the other, it is mere an emphasis to focus on the stern opposite. The third stanza ends again with an ironical note. This stanza points out that she is a 'virgin' with many lovers. She is engaged in love-making every day, yet she is far away from true love and care. Fourth stanza resumes the objectified narrative. The speaker expresses what the other women think of her. She discloses the female gaze. The women around her comment that she is a 'sinner' and she will die a 'leper's death'. There are some native words used in the poem. 'barali fish' and 'mekhela' are the Assamese words included in the poem. These words are also used as metaphors. She says that she is demanded to dance like a 'barali fish' in accordance with the stream of the river. Her breasts are like 'Saramati Peak' and her mekhela is like Rhododendron. It is possible that she elevates her position to that of the natural objects. It is as if only the nature could understand her state of mind. The world of nature may know her agony, which the humankind has traditionally deferred to. The fifth stanza brings into discussion again an objectified comment. It states the voice of the elderly lady. The word 'white hair' symbolically implies the same. Such voices are many. Their voices carry plurality of meanings, when they opine on her life. These elderly ladies suggest that the innocent ladies should not make a dent at the speaker from the other side of the river. These ladies say that the 'immediate shadow' of the innocent women may have made love with the daughters. By the word 'immediate shadow', the relative male members of the innocent women are referred to. The elderly ladies also refer to the sayings of the wise people. The wise men say that like a General of a war 'the whores' can seize and protect. It means that 'the whores' can take care of the 'immediate soul' and can 'trap' them. According to the elderly ladies, the speaker can use black magic to influence other people. Because she knows 'unknown travelers' and 'murky hunters.'

These stanzas indicate what the people in the society comment on the speaker. The sixth stanza has a sudden change of the tone of the speaker. This stanza begins with a melancholic tone. This stanza nullifies the significance of the speaker's claims for her love-making in the previous stanzas. The speaker is reflective of the literal meaning for a while. Her body is now a mere a skeleton. Skin is bleak and the bones are visible through. There is one more metaphor to indicate the poor health of the speaker. The body of the speaker looks like the beast strung up by a butcher on a post to dry up. It is a body familiar with the fiend of gloominess and distress. This stanza is all about the reality of the speaker's life. It is all about the pain and difficulties. After these lines, the tone is changed suddenly. The speaker claims that she has to fight back the difficulties of life resulting from the 'art of making wine.' By learning this art, she has discovered the secrets of hatred and separation among people. She knows that the life of a human can be seen 'in the guise of separation'. Probably this separation refers to the alienation suffered by the wives of the visitors. Some kings and kingdoms are doomed because of such practices. There is also a reference to the 'Samhita' and 'Upanishads'. Even the 'heavenly voice' cries out to the lady to open the lid of the 'golden pitcher'. The 'golden pitcher' may be symbolic of the imagined beauty supposedly hidden in the body of the speaker. The mention of Veda and Upanishad may hint at the ancient traditions of the sex workers. The statement is that of a critic. Such a mention is available in Veda and Upanishads. The speaker's voice is much radical and intense in these lines. The tradition of 'veshya' and 'ganika' have been there from the ancient times. Monica Saxena(2006) writes in the essay entitled, "Ganikas in Early India: Its Genesis and Dimensions":

"In the Mahabharata and Ramayana, both the word *ganika* and *vesya* are used for prostitutes. In the *Udyogparva*, Yudhisthira sends greetings to the *vesyas* of the Kauravas. Courtesans are described as going out to welcome Krishna when he came on a mission of peace to the Kaurava court." (p 7)

Researches have been conducted on the traditions of sex workers from the ancient times. The quotation mentioned above clearly suggests the reference to the presence of 'ganika' and 'vesya' in the epics also. The poet of "Ode to Whore" may have hinted at these references, when she indicates Veda and Upanishads. But such a tradition does not hoist the speaker's position in the society. It fails her in the eyes of the people. The 'wine glasses' she prepares are scattered into pieces symbolically suggesting the failure of the lady in her earnest endeavors. In the essay "Indira Goswami and Her Novels" PrafullaKotoky(1984) writes:

"MRG shows a peculiar gift of presenting a situation-she has acquired the knack of rapidly building up a situation by adding to its new details which are immediately integrated. She has also learnt well the technique of perceptive presentation of her characters. And there is always in her that charming poetic sensibility which greatly enhances the happy readability of her works." (P 68)

The above-mentioned quotation is commented by the author in terms of the novels. However, these opinions are applicable in terms of the poems also. The analysis of the poem chosen for this paper shows that the 'sensibility' of the poet for the subject extols above all. In this poem, MRG pens down the 'situation' of the subject in a manner of critical analysis. By using proper poetic devices, she details down the chosen topic and brings out the anguish lurking behind the 'situation' of the subject. "The Journey of a Writer" captures an interview of Indira Goswami by SubhajtBhadra. It is authored by both Indira Goswami and SubhajtBhadra(2010). The following lines are important from the poet:

"I always believe in humanity. I am not a feminist; I am a humanist. Humanity should be the priority of the young writers today. Science and spirituality should proceed hand in hand and only when we can avoid all catastrophes." (p 200)

A humanistic approach can also be justified to read the poem. The poet indicates basically the deserving dignity of the speaker. A rejection to the justifiable manner of the ancient traditions of *ganikain* Veda and Upanishads also portrays the poet's humanistic attitude. The poet refuses to nod the religious faith in the Veda and Upanishad in case of the professions of *ganika* and *vesya*. Whatever philosophy abides by, the overall comment of the poet is against the objectification of the body. The poet demystifies the pathos behind the commodification of the body in "Ode to Whore."

Conclusion:

Through the lenses of feminist perspectives, the poem comments on the social status of the whore. The poem goes beyond the stereotypical addresses to the subject and highlight the deconstructed idea. Theoretical perspectives of objectification structure the thought in the poem. Future studies can amalgamate many other poems based on the same subject to reflect on the same ground. Researchers can also bring in Indira Goswami's feminist perspectives in short stories and fictions to interpret the poem.

Bibliography

1. Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. USA: Earl Mcpeak.
2. Ahmed, M. K. (2015). *Adhunik Asamiya Kabita*. Guwahati: Banalata.
3. Baldick, C. (2008). *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Newyork: Oxford University Press.
4. Barmudoi, A. (2017). *Nirbachita Asamiya Kabitar Samalochana*. Guwahati: Assam Publishing Company.
5. Bhadra, I. G. (2010). The Journey of a Writer: Indira Goswami in Conversation with Subhajt Bhadra. *Indian Literature*, 54(1), 188-200. Retrieved 04 30, 2020, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23344202>
6. Burry, P. (2008). *Beginning Theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
7. Goswami, I. (2012). Indira Goswami and Her Poems. Poemhunter.com-The World's Poetry AQRchive.

8. Hazarika, K. D. (2014). *Asamiya Kabita*. Dibrugarh: Banalata.
9. King, B. (2006). *Modern Indian Poet in English*. New Delhi: oxford India Paperbacks.
10. Kotoki, P. (1984). Indira Goswami and Her Novels. *Indian Literature*, 27(1), 63-68. Retrieved 04 14, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24158624>
11. Misra, T. (2011). Indira Goswami: Brave, Gentle and Bold. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(53), 29-31. Retrieved 04 30, 2020, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23065632>
12. Saxena, M. (2006). Gonika in Early India: Its Genesis and Dimensions. *Social Scientist*, 34(11/12), 2-17. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27644180>