

# **Mamoni Raisom Goswami's 'Nilakanthi Braja' – Silent Screams of widows: A Study**

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## **Abstract:**

Mamoni Raisom Goswami is a pioneer in giving a new direction to Assamese novel. She was born on 14<sup>th</sup> November, 1942 at Amranga satra of South Kamrup district in Assam. Her father's name was Umakanta Goswami and mother's name was Ambika Devi Goswami. Her family was deeply associated with Satra life of the Mahapurusha Sankardeva's 'Ekasarana Dharma'. She started her career quite early i.e. from her school days, writing short-stories. She wrote her first novel 'Chenabar Sat' at the age of 22. She wrote a number of quality short-stories and 14 novels like- 'Dantal Hatir Uye Khowa Haoda', 'Nilakanthi Braja', 'Tej aru Dhulire Dhuxarita Pristha', 'Ahiran' etc. She had also written poems of high quality.

She dedicated her entire life for humanity in the form of Literary works. However, she expressed her broad views creating a path for the development of the society. Through writings, which are mainly based on reality, she presented different bold issues like superstition, rituals performed in the name of religion, sexuality of women and highlights the conditions of downtrodden. She received so many literary awards including Sahitya Akademi Award (1982) and Jnanpith Award (200). She died in 29 November, 2011.

## Introduction:

Among the most well-regarded authors in contemporary Indian literature, Mamoni Raisom Goswami had published serious acclaimed works of fiction. She is not just a well known and celebrated figure in the Assamese literature, but also an Indian literary world. She based most of her work on the culture and traditions of Assamese people, economic political structure and the miserable lives of women in the society with minute observation. Living a devastating and tragic life, she always feels for the victims of exploitation and oppression. So that, as a humanist, she raised her voice against the injustice and attempted to structure social change through writings.

The themes of Ms. Goswami's novels are mainly based on the realistic society. For the realism in her writings, she is so popular among readers. The themes, settings, characters, language and literary devices- everything complement each other. She picked up so many incidents from her own life and with her mastery over the art of fiction writing moulds them into a creative form. Even several times she herself claimed that the major women characters are reflection of her own life. In her own words—

“The resentment and sorrow of my personal life is inter mixed with the female characters of mine. In the same way as those are inter mixed with the body of Giribala in Datal Hatir Uye Khowa Hauda, similarly the expression of my protest against sacrifice of animals is manifested through Bidhibala in Chinnamasta.”<sup>1</sup>

However, Saudamini in ‘Nilakanthi Braja’ is literally be her self-portrayal. ‘Nilakanthi Braja’ was written from the experiences Mamoni Raisom had when she was in the holy of Brindaban. This novel is a masterpiece of Mamoni Raisom Goswami.

‘Nilakanthi Braja’ (1976) is full of the pathetic conditions of the Radheswamis are tortured mentally and physically in Indian orthodox society in

the name of religion, culture, tradition etc. A running commentary of the custom for women that made them spend the rest of their lives in a holy pilgrimage, Vrindaban, after the death of their husbands. With the Radheswamis the inhuman activities occurrences in this holy city. Every page of this novel is full of pain and tears of the widows.

Women's position and status in Indian society specially in Hindu religious belief has always been ambivalent in the sense that on one hand she is revered and worshipped as a goddess and the other hand she is subjected to inane rules and regulations which violate very essence of being a woman. Mamoni Raisom writes the novel in the pathetic state of widows when she was in Vrindaban for her research work. She portrays not only the strained lives of Radheswamis, but also struggles for survival of the inhabitants of the holy city, fain and festivals, nomination of history, adultery and corruption made by monks. Saudamini is the main character of the novel. The story starts with the arrival of Dr. Roy Choudhary and wife Anupama along with widowed daughter Saudamini to Brindaban. After the death of her husband Saudamini fall in love with a young Christian man. But typical orthodox Roychoudhary family could never accept such relationship and brought Saudamini to the holy city of Lord Krishna for changing her mind, so that she could spend rest of her life as a widow. Her parents were very upset when their young daughter became a young widow-

“Xekh boyox keiti xantire kotam buli axa korisil, kintu xekh boyoxot teoloke keitaman maratmok aghat xojya koribologiya hol. Teo lokor ek matro jiyek Saudamini okalote bidhowa hobologiya hol.”<sup>2</sup>

(They wished to spend the last days of their life peacefully but in the last days, they had to suffer a lot of fatal pain. Their only daughter Saudamini has become a widow in such a young age.)

The holy place fails to change Saudamini's mind. Instead of that she gets more mentally disturb by the hellish condition of widows lived there. When she

went the dark mysterious 'Harabari' she found the pitiable and pathetic conditions of Radheswamis, who are in utter poverty and sexually exploited. Even she, herself tries to suppress her desires and proves to be a good daughter. But she gets more frustrated, commits suicide even when she gets a chance to start new life with her lover. With the silent protest made by Saudamini the story ends.

Mamoni Raisam Goswami is an excellent story teller as well as an excellent character creator. Saudamini partially reflects the novelist's own inner herself. Saudamini is a strong, beautiful, well educated and high class hindu Brahmin girl. But when her husband died after one year of their marriage, her this high class society proves to be a hindrance for her. People of this society made widowhood a curse and then force the widows to follow the hard rules rest of their lives. The same happens with Saudamini. She is bothering by the question how to over come one's bodily desire. But when she sees the reality she becomes a rebellious. She says-

“Kiman din thakibo eyat? Mon xongxodhon howa loike?  
Tetiya hole kio ahil tai? Tair dore lansito, tair dore..... kandi  
lobo nki aikhinite bohi kisu xomoy? Kosair dore onuvab rohit  
ejakor kotha vobatko i aikhinite bohi kisu xomoy kandi lobo  
neki?”<sup>3</sup>

(How long will she be here? Until mind becomes stable? Then why does she come here? Exploited like her..... Will she cry for sometime sitting here? Instead of thinking about emotionless butchers would she sit here for some time and cry?)

Like her parents Saudamini also thinks that as time passage she will be able to forget her lover. She tries to follow the social diktat to please her parents. She makes herself busy in assisting her father in his philanthropic venture of running his hospital he has opened to serve the needy and poor. Through she was unable to forget her lover she believes herself to be guilty due to her inability to

suppress her worldly inclination. Unable to adopt spiritually, Saudamini goes to all her acquaintances without hiding any of her emotions, in order to find out the reason of her inability. She openly talks about her inner-most feelings in front of the priest Charan bihari. She even interviews so many Radheswamis whether they have been able to surrender themselves totally to the Lord and thus become indifferent to their desires.

In this novel we see various women victims of social injustice. Though we can find tripartite presentation of three women in the novel, Saudami, Shashi and Mrinalini. This novel is also a powerful and thought provoking saga of the widows of Vrindaban, women who have been abandoned by their own families. These women live in utter poverty and pathetic conditions. They are depending on the Bhajan ashrams for their upkeep. These widows are called 'Radheswamis' – 'names of believers of Lord Krishna' because they earn their livelihood by chanting 'Radhe Shyam' all day long. These Radheswamis are exploited by strong religious and social discourages. With the hope of a decent living and a prestigious funeral as defined by Hindu law givers, they came to Vrindhaban. But the corrupt temple officials do not give them the meager amount they are entitled to. In utter poverty poverty and hunger they become a skeleton like figures as novelist describes them as 'Pretatmar dol' (ghostly figures) and 'Kankal sworup' (resembling a skeleton), with an absurd hope of salvation by dying at the holy Brindaban. What even meager amount of money that they earn after days of hand labour in the Bhajan ashrams has to be deposited with the pandas to ensure that they are cremated according to the Hindu rites after their death. If they do not do so, after their death the pandas will not touch dead' bodies and the bodies would be lying around for dogs and foxes. The young beautiful women are forced into prostitution or live with pandas and priests. But after all these have done by the Radheswamis there is no surety of respectful cremation as the pandas simply pocket the money and dispoase the widows' bodies in the Yamuna. They all know this yet these nameless, voiceless entities cannot escape the system which has them completely rendered mute and helpless. Novelist gives an example showing the pitiful conditions of the

widows-the Radheswamis while chanting the 'Bhajan' can not keep their eyes away from the vegetable vendors who are dumping the rotten vegetables in one place for the widows to come and buy them.

“Eiboror grahok ekmatra ei radhesyami xakal,” (The radheswamis are the only one who buy these rotten vegetables)

Caste system and untouchability are also there in Hindu religious system. Through the Harijan women character, the novelist has introduced the theme of untouchability prevalent in the holy city. She is an expert dancer who knows all the mudras to worship goddess. However, she is not allowed to enter the temple as she is a Harijan, she never protests, instead she obeys the discourse. When Mohan Rakesh offers her water, she does not even touch the vessel. After her husband's death with blessings of goddess Katyayani, she has devoted herself to Lord Brajachandra who, she believes also takes pleasure in her. She is a victim of the epistemic violence of the powerful upper caste.

Shashi, one of the Radheswamis, gets more attention in the novel. She is a young widow and all over Braja she is known as Alamgadhi's companion. She is one of the several widows of Brindaban who physical protection and in the hope of getting a respectful funeral after they die. She longs for a stronger and more passionate relationship which Alamgadhi can not give her. She is hopelessly in love with a young swami whom she can only gaze from a distance. After sold out the temple where Shashi lives and also Alamgadhi's death she loses shelter and companion. Though she adjusts herself with the situation. As Deoghari Baba says that a person is his own friend, foe and loving mother and can make his own destiny.

Mrinalini, another major character of the novel is a daughter of Thakur Sahab. She is an aging spinster who also deprived of a normal life. She takes care of her blind father and insane mother. They used to be a wealthy family but Thakur sahib had led life of a profligate and lost everything. They have to sell off

his property and take shelter in a hovel. For her family conditions Mrinalini's dream of marriage and motherhood withering away. She asks a group of Radheswamis-

“Tohote ko- Moi jano maak hobo nowarilo heten? Moi janu eti vogobanok jonmo dibo nowarilu heten?”<sup>5</sup>

(Could I not become a mother? Could I not have given birth to a 'divine child'?)

She is in utmost pain and loneliness. Only because of her father's poor financial decision, her life and future has dependence of a daughter on her father before her marriage.

If we see the characters, Shashi is different from Saudamini and Mrinalini in various aspects. Both Saudamini and Mrinalini are searching for a community that resembles themselves, Shashi prepares herself to adjust with the things going on, goes to Mrinalini and in spite of her own pitiable condition, Mrinalini gives her shelter.

Saudamini is the protagonist of the novel, who observes, analyses everything and finally rejects the construction of the widow stereotype. She revolts against the oppressions she is subjected to and has expressed her love for the Christian lover going against her orthodox society. Pointing an accusing finger at her father, she calls him a butcher. She holds him responsible for her miseries. The internal conflict between her desire and gender defined role lover and asks her to start a new life with him, she after a short meeting with him commits suicide as a mode of protest. Saudamini despite her several efforts, fails to break free from the clutches of the patriarchal discourse. Hence, she takes the ultimate step; as a statement of protest.

### **Conclusion:**

Mamoni Raisom Goswami is one of the dazzling contemporary stars of literature. This writer with a passionate commitment to man and his world around, have some appeal in them that have found expression in her creative

works- in the exposure of her internal mind. She is very much sensitive to humanity and not unalienated from the common human beings. The social fraud, melancholy, range of suffering, oppression, social exploitation wall available forms against the suffering humanity, race and class, find vivid expression in them through their unexpressed tears and sense of sorrow. At the time when it was taboo to talk about the exploitation and domination of women in a patriarchal setup she had the gumption to tackle the evils of the society head on and become the voice of decades of silence and subjugation. Mamoni Raisom Goswami, in her days at the holy city became fodder for her seminal and pioneer work on widows in 'Nilakanthi Braja'. She highlights the miserable conditions of the downtrodden of the society and expresses her agony through the novel.

**Foot Notes:**

1. Gogoi, Hridayananda, Dr. Indira Goswami: In search of Modernity, page-218
2. Goswami, Mamoni Raisom, Nilakanthi Braja, page-1
3. Ibid, page- 9-10
4. Ibid, page – 20
5. Ibid, page- 91

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1. Gogoi, Hridayananda: Adhunikataar Sandhanat, Jyoti Prakasha, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2005
2. Goswami, Mamoni Raisom: Nilakanthi Braja, Students' stores, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1989.
3. Srama, Gobinda Prashad: Upanyas aru Asamiy Upanyas, students' stores, 2012.
4. Thakur; Nogen: Axos bosoror Asamiya Upanyas, Jyoti Prakashan, 2012.