

CHAPTER-IV

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4.01. LANGUAGE OF PROTEST IN MAMANI RAISOM GOSWAMI'S NOVELS

Mamani Raisom Goswami has carved a niche for herself in Indian literature with her bold and evocative language which is rich in imagery and symbol. With the use of appropriate dialects, slangs and unique narrative skills Mamani Raisom has highlighted issues that had rarely been addressed in Assamese fiction like-the sexuality of women, psychology of widows , unfulfilled dreams etc. Her women protagonists like Giribala, Saudamini, Narayani and Dorothy have been shown as resolute and firm to fight against the situation they are placed in. A close study of these characters show the strong protest they register through their speech and action against all kinds of oppressions.

I.A. Richards has mentioned about two kinds of languages-i) emotive or felt language of modern novel and ii) Scientific or referential language. Emotive or felt languages have different layers of meanings. Apart from conveying the literal meaning, this language also hints at something deeper. On the other hand, the language used in News paper or science books which is direct, has been termed as 'scientific or referential language' by Richards. He writes

A statement may be used for the sake of reference, true or false, which it causes. This is the scientific use of language. But it may also be used for the sake of effects in emotion and produced by the reference it occasions. This is the emotive use of language.¹

¹ Richards,I.A. *Principles of Literary Criticism*,1926,p-267

Northrop Frye has used the terms 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' to mean these two kinds of languages respectively. When something is read, the mind of the reader moves in two directions at the same time- outward or centrifugal and inward or centripetal. While moving in the centrifugal direction, the mind moves from individual words to the things they mean. In centripetal direction, the mind moves in inward direction and tries to make a scene from the words it has read.²

Mamani Raisom Goswami is known for her emotive use of language. Her bold use of language contributes a lot to the popularity of her novels. The first feature that strikes one about her language is that it is always true to character and situation. Giribala and Saudamini are two rebels from higher class. Their language of protest is different from that of Narayani and Sonie, who are labourers. Both Saudamini and Giribala use strong words, but their language is refined and true to their culture. On the other hand, words like '*prostitute*', '*swine*' and other slangs frequently appear in the language of the labourers like Sonie and Narayani, which are part of their every day vocabulary. Bidhibala uses meek language as is expected of her. Again Dorothy's protest is different from others. Her words express her strong but controlled emotion which is true to the character of an English woman.

Mamani Raisom Goswami is known for her unique and inimitable expressions. She is gifted with an extra-ordinary command over expression. Her language certainly is emotive or felt and as such it has layers of meaning. The language of protest used by her characters certainly creates the desired effect. First it informs the readers about the cause of the protest and then makes them sympathetic for the protesters.

² See Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*, 1957, p-73

4.02. PROTEST BY THE GENDERED SUBALTERN

Giribala, the young widow and the daughter of Adhikar in *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā*, revolts against the suffocating customs meant for the widows and expresses her love for Mark Sahib. Her following words are full of emotions and the readers can at once understand the cause of her revolt.

*Oh, sahib, can you understand me? I cannot just exist, just for the sake of remaining alive, like Durga and Saru Gossainee.*³

These words take the readers inward into the mind of a young widow and her inability to cope with the life prescribed for a widow. There is also a plea to the Sahib to understand her condition. Mamani Raisom uses language as a dress to cover the tormented soul of her characters. But when language fails, her characters, especially the women, resort to silence. Giribala has been a rebel from the very beginning. When after the death of her husband, Giribala returns to her parental home, the village women come to see her. Giribala does not come out. But when their silly talks infuriate her, she bursts out and tells them she is still alive and leads a better life than all of them.

Moreover, the principles that guide her aunt are hollow for Giribala. While Durga regularly offers *puja* to the wooden sandals of her dead husband, the memory of her dead husband makes Giribala angry. Durga lived a comparatively longer conjugal life with a loving husband. But Giribala's husband was a man of loose moral character and had extra marital affair with an opium seller woman. It is natural that her mind is full of resentment against her dead husband. His memory does not bring any sense of love or respect to her mind as expected of a widow.

³Goswami, Indira. *The Moth- Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, 2005, p-198

4.03. SILENCE, WORDS AND ACTION- THREE MODES OF PROTEST

The first reaction on women's part to all oppression is silence. However, when silence and conformity to the patriarchal discourse do not work, the women become self aggressive. Thus in Goswami's novels silence does not stand for passivity, inactivity, escapism or fear. Her women characters make bold statements through their actions. Giribala from *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Howdā* and Saudamini from *Nilakanthi Braja* are two of the strongest women characters created by the novelist. They share the following common features-

- i) Both are young Hindu widows from respectable families.
- ii) Both live in suffocating atmosphere oppressed by hard rules in holy places- Giribala in a *Sattra* of South Kamrup, Assam and Saudamini in holy Brindaban.
- iii) Much to the displeasure of society and annoyance of parents, they develop love affairs with two Christians.
- iv) Both of them refuse to follow the code of conduct defined for widows.

On various occasions, these two characters revolt against the oppressions they are subjected to and have expressed their displeasures in clear words. However, their protests only aggravate their conditions. As their voices are not heard, or rather do not reach the intended receivers, they protest through their actions. Giribala's tasting of mutton is a strong statement against the oppression, because no widow in the *Sattra* has done that earlier. As a consequence of this protest, she is forced to undergo a rigorous purification process. Widowhood in a Hindu society with its dead weight of rules is a

social construct which both these characters defy. Under strict surveillance, the protest mode in Giribala becomes even stronger. On a rainy night, she enters into the hut of Mark Sahib and in clear words expresses her desire to die in his embrace. When caught, she again has to go through a purification process. Although the burning of the hut is symbolic and she is well informed to come out of it, she prefers to immolate herself rather than living a life of perpetual humiliation.

Saudamini also expresses her love for the Christian lover and her bodily desire which she is expected to ignore as a widow. After spending some days in *Braja* and closely observing the lives of the *radheswamis*, Saudamini understands herself better and also the futility of her effort to negate her desires. She revolts and declares that since she is an ordinary girl, she can not spend her whole life doing social service like a *devi*. She has realized how strong her desire to live with her lover is. Like an independent person she wishes to live her life according to her without any fear for the society. She calls her parents hypocrites for not trying to understand the basic truths.

Pointing an accusing finger at her father, she calls him a butcher. Thus she holds him responsible for her miseries. This accusation completes Saudamini's transformation from a submissive daughter to a deprived and oppressed rebel. For the most part of the novel, she remains a dutiful daughter who has imbibed the cultural discourses that define the role of a daughter. In her coming to *Braja* according to the wish of her parents, helping her father in nursing the ailing people and trying to cope with the life of *Braja*, the dutiful daughter in her is clearly visible.

Her protest through words fails to bring any change to her lot. It only makes her parents unhappy. The internal conflict between her desire and gender defined role torments her.

Finally when her father brings her lover and asks her to start a new life with him, she after a short meeting with him, commits suicide. Before her death, Saudamini makes a strong statement in front of her lover. Braja might be a holy place for others, but for Saudamini the only attraction of this place is her lover. Widows are taught to cling to the memories of their husbands, but Saudamini only has a hazy memory of her late husband and she sees him as an enemy now. She also tries to find faults with her dead husband.

These words of Saudamini are significant because they announce her freedom from the patriarchal and religious discourses. Unlike the *radheswamis*, Braja is not a holy place for her and thoughts of her dead husband no more torments her. She is well aware of the gross atrocities on women at every step. With a clear mind, Saudamini now prepares herself for the next step. On this occasion, she is not shouting, as she did on previous occasion. She has also learnt that her words will fall on deaf ear. So without losing her composure, she ends herself.

When protest through action is discussed, mention must be made about Narayani's killing of Thakur Sahib in the novel *Māmāre Dharā Tarowāl*. Thakur Sahib exploited Narayani sexually. But she had one consolation- he was impotent and could not impregnate her. But after months of physical relationship with Thakur, she conceived which infuriated her. From her betrayal by the young engineer at the beginning of the novel she bore a grudge against the male folk, especially the company officers. Out of dire necessity to support her family she was forced to sell her body to Thakur, but inwardly she felt humiliated. So one day she took her revenge by killing Thakur. This killing certainly expressed her anger against the dominant patriarchy.

Narayani also protested through words. When one night, two labourers Ramu and Bamu confronted her on her way back home from the Sahib's quarter and snatched away the money given by the sahib, she questioned them why they did not come to help her during her distress, her husband's illness and her pregnancy. She also expressed her anger against the union for calling the strike and thus robbing the poor workers of their food. Her declaration that she would do anything to earn a living and would not hesitate to be a prostitute shows her sense of responsibility towards her family.

Narayani refers to her pregnancy as 'sack of salt'. While for Mrinalini pregnancy is a divine gift, Narayani considers it a burden. Values, morality, quality all these are social construct and depend upon time and situation.

Dorothy Brown, in the novel *Chinnamastār Mānuhto* dares to leave her husband when she comes to know about his illicit affair. By walking out of the relationship, she challenges patriarchy and by deciding to live amongst the local Indians, who are the subject of the Britishers, she challenges the empire. Though her words of protest are not sharp like Giribala and Saudamini, these are strong and full of conviction. When the clerk tries to persuade her to keep the servant sent by Mr. Brown with her for her own safety, she strongly objects. Dorothy also announces her freedom saying that she will take her own decision and any interference from her husband in matters regarding her life is unwanted. She strongly says that the servant will be sent off and Mr. Brown should never think of visiting her.

Due to the over dominance of patriarchy, women are forced to silently bear everything in the novels of Mamani Raisom Goswami. While a few of them dare to challenge patriarchy through their words and actions, many women express their anger by

directing it on soft targets and at times it become inward. Raghama in the novel *Chenabor Sot*, vents her anger on her children who always demand food, Gosainee in the novel *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Houdā* beats her daughter Giribala every time she breaks rule, the labourers in her novels fight amongst themselves rather than directing their anger at the company owners who are the cause of all their miseries.

4.04. SUICIDE AS A MODE OF PROTEST

Saudamini and Giribala, despite their several efforts, fail to break free from the clutches of the patriarchal discourse. Hence they take the ultimate step –suicide. However, this culmination cannot be termed an escapist step. Rather, the buildup of the narrative suggests that suicide in both cases is a statement of protest. Elaine Showalter in her seminal work *A Literature of Their Own* has stated,

*Suicide becomes a grotesquely fantasized female weapon, a way of cheating men out of dominance. Martyrdom and self-immolation are viewed as aggressive, as a way of inflicting punishment on the guilty survivors.*⁴

From this point of view, the suicides of both Saudamini and Giribala are strong and bold steps to protest against the dominant patriarchy. Saudamini is given the permission to start a new life with her Christian lover, which has been her dream ever since the death of her husband. But she prefers to end her life because she knows by marrying her Christian lover; she will only earn disgrace for her loving father, sympathy for her ailing mother and a bad reputation for herself because by marrying a Christian youth she will break rules made by patriarchy. The patriarchy is opposed to the marriage of a widow and marriage with an outcaste is a heinous crime. Again Giribala decides to end her life

⁴Showalter, Elaine *A Literature of Their Own*, 1977, p-250.

rather than living a life oppressed by rigid rules and customs. The dead weight of rules to be observed by widows, the humiliating suppression of her desires and a complete negation of her body makes her believe that death is better than life.

Bidhibala in the novel *Chinnamastār Mānuhto* ends her life by not taking food for several days. It is important to note that the novelist has portrayed the character of Bidhibala as a meek one and as such the step taken by her is in accordance with her character. She cannot take immediate step to kill herself like Saudamini and Giribala. However, the protest in her step is clearly visible. Her father Singhadatta is very dominating and she does not dare to express her mind in any matter related to her life-be it her marriage to the already married elderly person or the sacrifice of the innocent buffalo for her welfare. She prays to the goddess to take her life in lieu of the buffalo whose frightened look has pierced through her heart. She also expresses her desire to rebel against her father's decision of her marriage to an already married elderly man.

The thought of rebellion is there in her mind but due to the over dominance of her father, she fails to protest. But when she meets compassionate Ratnadhar, she speaks out her mind and the meek character appears as a girl with strong conviction. As Ratnadhar asks her to read *Kalika Puran* referring to the alternative provision other than animal sacrifice mentioned in the book Bidhibala says that she will never read a scripture that recommends animal sacrifice to please the goddess even if someone asks her a million times to do so. Instead, she wishes to worship goddess offering her songs that tell about her miseries.

Thus she is resolute in her stand against animal sacrifice for the appeasement of Maa Kamakhya. These words also hint at the domination of patriarchy. Her unspoken words

take the form of tears and her suppressed desires have turned into a stone. These words first inform the readers about her condition and then make them feel for her. She persuades Ratnadhar to release the buffalo brought for sacrifice. When Ratnadhar is confronted by her father, she feels guilty. Unable to protest against her father openly, she escapes with the group of prostitutes from North Shekhadari who visit Kamakhya Temple once every year. After a month, she is brought dead by a prostitute, who seeks forgiveness of the goddess claiming her innocence in the matter. Through her words the novelist has informed the readers that Bidhibala has moved with the group of prostitutes of her own free will. During her stay with the prostitutes, she has neither taken any food, nor drunk a drop of water. All these time she has been worried about the well being of the buffalo brought by her father for sacrifice and thinking of the animal she has cried. Thus Bidhibala's death is also a protest against animal sacrifice in the temple of Maa Kamakhya.

Unlike Bidhibala, Mrinalini in the novel *Nilakanthi Braja* has directly held her father responsible for her lot as she says that her spendthrift father has ruined all their property. When Mrinalini in the novel expresses her heart and revolts, her words immediately make the readers aware about the situation of a spinster in society.

*Could I not become a mother? Could I not have given birth to a 'divine' child? Why did I have to spend my whole life taking care of these two old scarecrows, being the 'keepers' of these two ghost-like old creatures? Tell me, has anyone else ever had to face such a situation?*⁵

⁵Goswami, Indira. *The Blue-necked God*, 2013, p-141

These set of four questions have four different connotations. The first question expresses her desire to be a mother. Discourses have made motherhood an integral part of a woman's life cycle and Mrinalini has internalized the discourse. She believes motherhood would have made her life normal. The second question hints at the divinity attached to a child and also Mrinalini's desire to be a part of that divinity. In the third question, Mrinalini attacks patriarchy. Her parents are referred to as 'old scarecrows' and 'ghost-like old creatures' and looking after them cannot be the sole purpose of her life. Society has defined the role of a good daughter as is evident in case of Saudamini. But like her, Mrinalini also defies the rules. Moreover, her parents can also be seen as representative of patriarchy. Her total dependence on her father and his bankruptcy has ruined her life. Her mother has also internalized patriarchy and has become a device of patriarchy in implementing its discourses. The last question brings to light her essential loneliness and the insecurity that comes as corollary.

Just before uttering these words, Mrinalini tears off her blouse and exposes her breast in front of everyone present there. This action is very unusual for a girl and that too from a respectable family. Thus her action goes parallel with her strong words of protest. However, after this protest Mrinalini does never lose her temper throughout the novel, even though her situation remains the same. She becomes a stoic and remains silent. Sahil Mayaram in the essay *Speech, Silence and Making of Partition Violence in Mewar* writes that speech is often viewed as the binary opposite of silence, a situation resulted from the absence of voice. He is of the opinion that both language and speech do not

preclude silence. He also points to the association between speech, silence and construction of truth.⁶

In the novel *Nilakanthi Braja*, apart from Saudamini another character commits suicide and the character is Thakur Saheb, Mrinalini's father. When this act of suicide is compared with that of Saudamini, Giribala and Bidhibala, the difference becomes crystal clear. Thakur Saheb was a rich man and owner of a temple in the Braja. But because of his profligacy and spendthrift nature, he is now a bankrupt. The whole family has to bear the brunt of his poor financial decisions. Moreover, his health also fails him. To make situation difficult, he has a lunatic wife. The condition of his spinster daughter also torments him. For all his misfortunes and sufferings, he can only blame himself. So he commits suicide at the fag end of his life which can be seen as an escapist step.

4.05. SUBALTERN MALE CHARACTERS:

Apart from these women characters, there are few male characters that use both language and action to protest. Shivanna in the novel *Chenābar Sōt* is the first among the labourers to demand a proper compensation for his co-worker Sadashiva. His demand immediately catches the attention of the officers and labourers for several reasons. No one before him dared to question the company officers. Since his words cause a positive change, initially he cannot be termed a subaltern. But his ultimate action of preparing to leave the place along with Sonie in search of a new job places him in the same category of the labourers who do not have the bargaining power in

⁶ See Mayaram sahil *Speech, Silence and Making of Partition Violence* in Amin, Shahid and Dipesh Chakrabarty (ed) *Subaltern Studies IX*,2008,p-127

company. Yashowant in the novel *Māmare Dharā Tarowāl* is the first *harijan* leader of the labourers' organization. Unlike other leaders, he does not betray the poor labourers. Even though he cannot change the condition of the poor labourers, his action in the end of the novel certainly hints at a revolutionary change. He confronts one of the betrayers Mr. Shastri with a sharp sword in his hand.

The minor characters in the novels of Mamani Raisom Goswami also register protest in strong words. In the novel *Datāl Hātir Uye Khowā Houdā*, the *mohura* of the Gossain went to collect taxes from the tenant farmers that were united under a local communist leader to protest against imposition of tax by the land owners. One old farmer told the *mohura* that they were now aware of rights and knew what to demand. They would pay no bribe to make false and temporary land deals and sent off the *mohura* with warning.

While the words are strong, the action that follows is stronger. These deprived farmers kill Indranath brutally.

Against this strong protest, there is meek protest in the novel *Ahiraṇ*. The labourers are angry with Nirmala and Thakur because of their illicit relation. When the flood sweeps them away and Harsul is busy to rescue them, the labourers feel pity for honest Harsul. They vow to attack the couple if they come back. One labourer even says that they will destroy the guest house pelting stone at it. Though most of the labourers support this plan, they fail to protest when the couple comes back. There is not a single voice of protest. The novelist narrates,

*No one would come forward. Why? Was this the powerful dumb language of the deepest distress and sorrow, the most potent weapon of all?*⁷

The protest mode is stronger in case of the women characters in the novels of Mamani Raison Goswami. This 'doubly effaced class' is more dominated than the males and that is why their protest is also stronger, because where there is suppression, only there can be seen protest and more the suppression, stronger is the protest.

⁷*Selected Works of Indira Goswami, Opcit, p-207*