

Chapter 1

The Novels of Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Anita Desai

CHAPTER 1

THE NOVELS OF MAMONI RAISOM GOSWAMI AND ANITA DESAI

1.0: Introduction:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Anita Desai are versatile writers of global repute. They are two highly esteemed litterateurs of Post-Colonial Indian literature. They have exhibited rare literary skills as devoted novelists. They have placed themselves as legendary authors with their great literary dexterity.

This chapter intends to highlight on the life and works of both Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Anita Desai. It also attempts to have a glimpse at their major novels.

1.1: Mamoni Raisom Goswami:

Birth and family background -

Indira Goswami, pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami was born on 14th November, 1942 at Guwahati. She was the blessed daughter of Umakanta Goswami and Ambika Devi Goswami. Mamoni Raisom Goswami was fortunate enough to be born and brought up in such a reputed Brahmin family of Assam. Uma Kanta Goswami was the Principal of Cotton College in 1949. Then he became the Director of Higher Education, Assam.

Here one important point must be mentioned that Mamoni Raisom Goswami's original name is Indira Goswami. But she is popularly known by her pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami. Mentionably, Raisom was the title of her husband.

Education:

She started her primary schooling at Latasil Primary School in 1950 and then moved to Pine Mount School at Shillong, Meghalaya. She was admitted to Tarinicharan Choudhury Higher Secondary School and completed her matriculation in 1956. She took her graduation from Cotton College in 1960. Then in 1963 she obtained her Master of Arts Degree in Assamese from the University of Gauhati.

Professional Life:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami joined Goalpara Army School as a teacher. Then she started her profession as a professor in the Department of Modern Indian Languages at Delhi University, Delhi in 1971.

Youth and Married Life:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami's youth was full of ups and downs. Actually she was obsessed with death from her childhood. She had made many attempts to commit suicide but God saved her each time. She got married to Madhaven Raisom Iyengar, an engineer from Gujrat and became Mamoni Raisom Goswami. But her blessed married life did not last longer as her husband had met an untimely and tragic death by accident. Again Mamoni Raisom Goswami had sunk in the ocean of sorrow and she lost hope for life. At this crucial time of her life her teacher professor Upendra Chandra Lekharu encouraged her to face life boldly and go for research.

To be mentioned Mamoni Raisom Goswami carried out her research on a comparative study on Tulsidas' Ramanaya and Madhav Kandali's Ramayana under the supervision of professor Upendra Chandra Lekharu. Indira Goswami obtained her Doctor of Philosophy Degree from Gauhati University in 1973. She was awarded with D. Lit Degree by Rabindra Bharati Viswavidyalaya, Indira Gandhi Open University, Rajib Gandhi University in 2000, 2006 and 2008 respectively.

Literary Contribution:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami has rich contribution to Assamese literature. Some of her major literary works are -

Books of Mamoni Raisom Goswami in Assamese:

1. Chenabor Shrot, 1972 (The Current of Chenab)
2. Nilakanthi Braja, 1976 (The Blue-Necked God)
3. Ahiron, (1980)
4. Mamore Dhara Tarowal, 1980 (The Rusted Sword)
5. Datal Hatir Uye Khowa Howdah, 1988 (The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker)
6. Tej Aru Dhulire Dhusarita Pristha, 1992 (Pages Stained with Blood)
7. Dasharathir Khoj, 1999
8. Chinnamastar Manuhto, 2001(The Man from Chinnamasta)
9. Thengphakhri Tahsildarar Tamar Tarowal, 2009 (The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar)
10. Adha Lekha Dastabej, 1988 (An Unfinished Autobiography)

Collection of Short Stories:

1. Cinaki Maram (1962)
2. Koina (1965)
3. Hriday Ek Nadir Nam (1988)
4. Nirbachita Galpa (1998)
5. Priya Galpa (1999)

English Books:

1. Ramayana: From Ganga to Brahmaputra (1996)
2. Shadow of Kamakhya (2002)
3. Selected works of Indira Goswami (1998)
4. Shadow of Dark God (1986)

Some of Mamoni Raisom Goswami's novels have been translated into English. For example:

1. *The Current of Chenab* is the translated version of Assamese *Chenabor Shrot*.
2. *The Blue Necked God* is the English version of *Nilkanthi Braja*
3. *The Rusted Sword* is the English version of *Mamare Dhara Tarowal*.
4. *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* and *A Saga on South Kamrup* are the two translated versions of the Assamese novel *Datal Hatir Uye Khowa Howdah*.

Books in Hindi

1. Mamoni Raisom Goswami ki kahaniyan (self translated), (2001)
2. Jindagi kai Sauda Nahin (1992)
3. Dakshin Kamrup ki Gatha (1997)
4. Chinnamasta (2002)

Other Contribution: Mamoni Raisom Goswami contributed a lot to Assamese life and the society beyond her literary contributions. It must be mentioned that she had founded the South East Asia Ramayana Research Centre at Gandhi Basti, Guwahati,

Assam. The centre was inaugurated by Dr. Nuria Mohammad, a Ramayana scholar from Malaysia in 20th January 2008. It was founded with a view to help the Ramayana loving students in particular and the people of the world in general.

She worked as the chief interlocutor between the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) and the Central Govt. of India for initiating peace talk process. To mention, ULFA constituted the People's Consultative Group in Assam to initiate the talk process as mediator between the Central Govt. and the outfit itself. Goswami tried to carry out the duty entrusted on her with full commitment.

Literary Awards:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami had been conferred with so many literary accolades in her life time along with Indian's most prestigious award for literature 'Jnanpith' in 2000. To mention only a few –

1. Sahitya Academy Award (1983)
2. Assam Sahitya Sabha Award (1988)
3. Bharat Nirman Award (1989)
4. Jnanpith Award (2000)
5. Prince Clauz Award, Netherland (2008)
6. Asom Ratna Award (2011)

Member in committee:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami was a member of many prestigious committee and organisations. To mention a few –

1. The Advisory Committee (Assamese) of Sahitya Academy, New Delhi (1988– 1992)

2. Member in Academic Council, Delhi University.
3. The Research Committee, Delhi University (1982-1992)
4. The Comparative Indian Literature Association, Delhi University.
5. Advisor of Planning Commission, Govt. of India, 2004.
6. Member, Sankardev Kalakhetra of Govt. of Assam.
7. Convenor of the Board of Studies (Assamese), Punjab University.
8. The Association of Indian Authors, New Delhi (1990-1995)

Death:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami left for heavenly abode on 29th November, 2011 at 7:45 a.m at Guwahati Medical College Hospital. This eminent author died of multiple organ failure after a prolonged illness. She was only 69 at the time of death. The last rites of this legendary woman were performed with full state honours. Mamoni Raisom Goswami's death has created a big void in the literary scene in India.

1.2: ANITA DESAI:

Birth and family background:

Anita Desai was born on 24th June, 1937 in Mussorie, Uttarakhand, India. Anita Desai's father was Dhiren N. Mazumdar and mother was Antoinette Nime Mazumdar. Anita Desai's father was a Bengali by birth and mother was a German.

Education:

Anita Mazumdar (Anita Desai) did her schooling at Queen Mary's Higher Secondary School at Delhi. Then she went to Miranda House, a women's College of

Delhi University and took her graduation degree in 1957 with honours in English literature.

Youth and married life:

Anita Desai, from her childhood was a multilingual. She could speak Bengali, German, Hindi and English fluently. She learnt English at school and hence felt it easy to use it as her literary language. Anita Mazumdar got married to Ashvin Desai on 13th December, 1958 and thenceforth known as Anita Desai. Ashvin Desai was a business executive. Anita Desai is blessed with four children – Rahul, Tani, Arjun and Kiran. Her daughter Kiran Desai is also a prolific writer.

Professional life:

Anita Desai started her professional life at Max Muller Bhavan, Calcutta. After her marriage she has taught at Girton College and Smith College in England. She has worked as the Gilder Sleeves Professor at Barnard University and as the Purington Professor of English at Mount Holyoke College in the United States. In addition she has been the Emerita John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge.

Literary Contribution:

Anita Desai's contribution to literature is praiseworthy. She is widely read not only in India but also in abroad. She has written many novels, short stories, book reviews etc. Some of her literary works are mentioned below:-

Novels:

1. Cry, the Peacock (1963)

2. Voices in the City (1965)
3. Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971)
4. Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975)
5. Fire on the Mountain (1977)
6. Clear Light of Day (1980)
7. In Custody (1984)
8. Baumgartner's Bombay (1988)
9. Journey to Ithaca (1995)
10. Fasting, Feasting (1999)
11. The Zigzag Way (2004)
12. Hill of Silver, Hill of Lead (2005)

Children Book:

1. The Village by the Sea (1982)
2. The Peacock Garden (1991)

Collection of Short Stories:

1. Games at Twilight (1978)
2. Diamond Dust (2000)
3. The Artist of Disappearance (2011)

Literary Awards:

Anita Desai has coveted many prestigious awards in her lifetime. Some of them are –

1. Winifred Holtby Prize (1978)
2. National Academy of Letters Award (1978)
3. Sahitya Academy Award (1980)
4. Moravia Prize for Literature (1983)
5. Guardian Children's Fiction Prize (1983)
6. Shortlisted for Booker Prize for Fiction in 1980 for *Clear Light of Day*
7. Shortlisted for Booker Prize for Fiction in 1984 for *In Custody*
8. Shortlisted for Booker Prize for Fiction in 1999 for *Fasting, Feasting*

Member in committee: Anita Desai is an honourable member of different committee. For example –

1. Member of the Advisory Board for English of the National Academy of letters, Delhi.
2. Member, The American Academy of Arts and Letters.
3. Fellow, The Royal Society of Literature.

1.3: MAMONI RAISOM GOSWAMI AND ANITA DESAI: A brief evaluation as novelists –

Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Anita Desai stand among the most celebrated Indian writers. Mamoni Raisom Goswami has adopted Assamese, her mother tongue as her literary language whereas Anita Desai has selected English for the same purpose. Albeit their language of expression is different, they bear almost the same attitude and

temperament as women writers. They are very successful as writers in the sense that their novels are universally accepted.

They are given recognition in their life time. They are universally accepted as talented writers. People wish to acquire the knowledge and experience from their literary works. Therefore many reputed universities of the world have included these two authors in their syllabus. To illustrate, some of Mamoni Raisom Goswami's novels have been prescribed in Delhi University, Calcutta University, Lucknow University, Gujarat University, Gauhati University, Indira Gandhi Open University etc. In the same way, Anita Desai's novels have been prescribed in Gauhati University, Tezpur Central University, Goa University, Central University of Gujarat, Jadavpur University, MIT. World Peace University (Pune) etc.

It is a matter of pride that many books written by Mamoni Raisom Goswami are translated into different languages such as English, Hindi, Bengali, Manipuri, Nepali, Cannada, Bodo etc. For example, Goswami's autobiographical novel '*Adhalekha Dostabej*' has been translated into English as '*An Unfinished Autobiography*', and into Hindi as '*Jivan Sundar Nehi*'. Likewise some of Anita Desai's novels are also translated into different languages. For example, her award winning novel '*Fire on the Mountain*' is translated into Urdu.

Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Anita Desai are gifted writers. They have extraordinary art of storytelling. They are experts in the use of language. They use emotive language in their novels. In this context renowned critic and scholar of Assam Prof. Gobinda Prasad Sarma comments: "Mamoni Raisom Goswami never writes poetry. Nevertheless just as Anita Desai's novels are always poetic especially because

of their language though she never writes poetry, so also Mamoni Raisom Goswami's novels always appeal like poetry, especially because of their language."¹

It must be mentioned that Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Anita Desai's novels are made films, serials etc. To mention, Mamoni Raisom Goswami's award winning novel *Datal Hatir Uye Khowa Howdah* has been made a film by Assamese director Santana Bardoloi in 1996. The name of the film is '*Adajya*' and it has got National Award for Best Feature Film in Assamese, in the year 1996.

The Hindi feature film '*Muhafiz*' 1993, is a film based on Anita Desai's 1984 Booker Prize nominated novel *In Custody*. The film was directed by Ismail Merchant. Interestingly the screen play was written by Anita Desai herself with the help of Shahrukh Hussain. Her novel *Village by the Sea* was adapted for television by the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1992.

This research work on "THE NOVELS OF MAMONI RAISOM GOSWAMI AND ANITA DESAI: A CRITICAL STUDY" takes into consideration seven major novels from each of the concerned novelists.

The selected novels at a glance: The novels of Mamoni Raisom Goswami -

1. Chenabor Shrot (1972):

The novel tells about the exploitation of labourers engaged in constructing an aqueduct on the river Chenab under a construction company. The labourers live a mean life while the management takes the benefit of their hardwork. The labourers

1. Prof. Gobinda Prasad Sarma: The Worm-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker (article), Nikumoni Hussain (edited), Mamoni Raisom Goswami Abha Aru Pratibha. Page -332

move from one to another branch for work. The novel describes the life struggle of the labourers through Soni. Soni, the widow of Gauri Sankar is pregnant and she has no money. She comes to the branch in search of work for her living.

Here she meets her former husband Shibanna. Shibanna wants to get her back but she refuses him on the ground that he is not trustworthy and also he has illicit affair with one memsahib. Finally Soni agrees to go with Shibanna for the sake of her baby.

2. Nilakanthi Braja (1976):

The novel shows the plight of the widows in a patriarchal society. Saudamini is a childless young widow. She falls in love with a Christian youth and wishes to marry him. Saudamini's orthodox parents are not ready to allow her to marry for the second time as widow marriage is considered as a sin. Therefore they take her to holy Vrindaban with the hope that the holiness will soothe her heart and show her the right path. But Saudamini remains the same. The sad life of the Radheswamis at Vrindaban has saddened her much. Day by day she feels much tormented by her carnal desires. Saudamini's father Dr. Raichoudhury understands his daughter's problems. He secretly invites the Christian lover and sends his daughter to meet him. Saudamini surrenders herself to her lover. But suddenly she feels a void in her heart. She, in a moment of conflict between dignity and sin, commits suicide.

3. Ahiron (1980):

The novel depicts the sufferings and exploitation of labourers employed in the construction of aqueduct in the river Ahiron in Chattishgarh. Nirmala is an educated

widow of Pandey. In her youth Nirmala's marriage is fixed with a doctor. The marriage could not take place as she was exploited physically by one of her admirers in the market place. Eventually she marries Pandey, a tuberculosis patient. After the death of Pandey, she marries an elderly manager Harshul Sahib with a hope to start her life again and enjoy motherhood. But she remains sterile again. Later on she makes physical relation with a young engineer and conceives for the first time. Finally Nirmala, considering her foetus as a product of her sin aborts it with her own hands.

4. Mamore Dhara Tarowal (1980):

The novel deals with the lives of the labourers employed in construction works on the river Sai. The Harijan labourers basically work as sweepers in the branch. These Harijan labourers have faced the worst impact of the labour strike that suddenly announced at the branch. The strike has made their living quite impossible. Narayani, a harijan woman sells her body to the Sahibs to earn her family's living. She visits the quarters of the Sahib's at night. The Sahibs give her money and bread only in exchange of her body. Eventually she becomes pregnant from the Sahib whom she knew to be impotent. This unexpected situation makes her mad with anger. She passes through humiliation and finally she kills the Sahib with an axe considering him guilty of making her life a hell.

5. Datal Hatir Uye Khowa Howdah (1988):

The novel deals with two parallel stories – the plight of the widows and the feudal system of Assam. There are three widows in the novel – Saru Gosani, Durga and Giribala. Giribala represents the Brahmin widows who suffer in an orthodox society. Giribala, a young girl loses her husband just after her marriage. As a widow she has to

live her life according to the customs of the society. She protests against the society many times by violating the set rules. But she has to undergo penance for her sins. During her stay at her paternal house she comes into close contact with a foreign researcher Mark Sahib and she feels attracted to him. It is a sin for a widow to think of another man except her deceased husband. One rainy night Giribala is forced by circumstance go to Mark's room and is caught by some villagers. Having been discovered half naked at a foreigner's room she is convicted of moral transgression. The priest of the village announces her penance. The penance demands the raising of a straw hut for a symbolic fire. Giribala is asked to enter the hut and come out while the hut is set on fire. But Giribala intentionally remains inside the hut and accepts death by fire. On the other hand, Indranath, the future head of the vaishnavite monastery wants to put an end to the tradition of feudalism. But due to a misunderstanding, Indranath has been brutally killed by the farmers.

6. Tej Aru Dhulire Dhusarita Pristha (1992):

This novel presents the murderous violence and fury of the 1984 riots in Delhi following the assassination of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It gives a detailed description of the brutal murders and mass killings in Delhi. The narrator is a witness of the riot.

7. Chinnamastar Manuhto (2001):

The central theme of the novel is that of blood sacrifice at Kamakhya temple in Assam. The novel depicts the beliefs, rituals, festivals and fairs of Kamakhya temple. It gives a pen picture of the temple as well as the animal sacrifice in the name of the Goddess. There is a campaign against the blood sacrifice at Kamakhya. Saint Jatadhari

leads the movement against animal sacrifice to worship the Goddess. In the course of the novel, two innocent women have sacrificed their lives. Dorothy Brown is murdered by some unidentified criminals whereas Bidhibala dies out of sorrow and fear that the buffaloes have been sacrificed for the sake of her future.

The novels of Anita Desai -

1. Cry, the Peacock (1963):

The novel begins with the death of Maya's pet dog, Toto. Maya is unhappy in her married life with Gautama. Maya is very young and loving wife of an elderly and practical husband Gautama. For Maya love is life but for Gautama love is only a part of life. Maya and Gautama are different from each other. Maya is a childless woman. She has childhood obsession for death as an astrologer has predicted an early death in the fourth year of her marriage either of Maya or her husband. Maya becomes almost insane at the thought of death in the fourth year of her marriage. She fails to make her husband understand her agony. Finally she kills her husband and also kills herself.

2. Voices in the City (1965):

The novel talks about three sensitive siblings – Nirode, Monisha and Amla. They are forced by circumstance to live at Calcutta. Nirode fails in his every attempt to establish himself in the new city. Amla marries an artist seeking fulfillment in love but becomes frustrated. Monisha gets married to Jiban, a dull and passive government worker. Monisha is childless. She faces mental torture at her in-laws house. She loses all her hope and finally dies by self-immolation.

3. Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971):

The novel deals with three characters – Adit, Dev and Sarah. Adit and Dev are Indian immigrants living in England. Adit is already established and Dev has just arrived at London in search of livelihood. Sarah, an English by birth, is the wife of Adit. Sarah suffers from frustration and faces humiliation for marrying an Indian. Adit and Dev have a mixed feeling of love and hate towards their new country. Finally Dev settles down in England and Adit comes back to India along with his wife.

4. Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975):

The novel is divided into three parts – Monsoon '67, Winter '67 and Monsoon '67. The first part opens with the arrival of Sita at Manori Island accompanied by Menaka and Karan, two of her children. She comes to Manori not to give birth of her fifth baby but to keep him inside her womb. Sita believes that it is possible only at Manori, the island where she passed her childhood. For her Manori is an island of miracle. The second part 'Winter '67' shows Sita as a child. She remembers her father as a man of miracle. Her father calls his house 'Jeevan Ashram' – the home of soul. Sita doubts if her father cures by magic and not by medicine and faith. The third part 'Monsoon '67' Sita's husband Raman comes to Manori and proposes her to go back to Bombay. Sita comes back with her family to her house at the city.

5. Fire on the Mountain (1977):

The novel presents the plight of Nanda Kaul a widow of a Vice Chancellor. Nanda Kaul comes to live all alone at Carignano, at Kasauli hills at her old age. She has her family in the city but she wants nobody. She is already tired of her busy life as a Vice Chancellor's wife and mother of many children. Nanda feels sad to learn that her

great grand-daughter is coming to live with her at Carignano. Although Nanda considers Raka as an intruder first but finally accepts her. Ila Das, an old friend of Nanda comes to meet her. Ila Das, a welfare officer, is raped and killed. Nanda died of the shock that Ila is murdered. Raka puts fire on the mountain for the fun of it.

6. Clear Light of Day (1980):

The novel describes the tensions in a post partition Indian family. It has four sections. The story deals with the life of four siblings – Raja, Baba, Bim and Tara. Part one of the novel shows Tara's visit to her parental house where her elder sister lives with their mentally retarded brother Baba. Tara, now as an ambassador's wife, finds it difficult to adjust at her old house. In part two of the novel, the characters are in their adolescents in their house. Raja has been suffering from tuberculosis. Mira Masi dies of alcoholism. Raja goes to live at Hyderabad with their Muslim land lord Hyder Ali. Tara gets married to Bakul and goes away with him. Bim remains alone to take care of her mentally retarded brother. In the third part, all the three siblings are depicted awaiting the birth of Baba. The children are now raised by Aunt Mira. The children share their future dreams. The final section shows Bim's realization that she should forgive her siblings – Raja and Tara. Bim admits that family and home are important part of life.

7. In Custody (1984):

The novel is about Deven, a young lecturer in Hindi at Mirpore. Deven leads a dull and colourless life. His financial condition is not good as he works as a temporary lecturer. He is even not happy with her ambitious wife Sarala. Sarala is also a frustrated woman. Deven gets a proposal from his friend Murad to take an interview with the celebrated Urdu poet Nur Sahjehanbadi. Deven is a passionate lover of Urdu poetry and

considers Nur as his hero. He accepts his friend's proposal with the hope that the interview would change his financial position at the same time bring fame to him. Deven is shocked to find that Nur is surrounded by gamblers and prostitutes. Finally his interview with Nur fails. Deven comes back with the realization that it is hard to escape from problems.

1.4: Conclusion: This chapter focuses briefly on the life and works of both Mamoni Raison Goswami and Anita Desai. A thematic view of the seven novels selected from each of the authors undertaken for study is also included in this chapter.