

Chapter 6

Folkloristic Perspective in the

Novels of Mamoni Raisom Goswami

and Anita Desai

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6.0: Introduction:

Folklore includes the traditional beliefs, customs and oral literature of a community or a country. According to ‘A Glossary of Literary Terms’, “Folklore has been the collective name applied to sayings, verbal compositions and social rituals that have been handed down solely, or at least primarily, by word of mouth and by example rather than in written form.”¹ “Folklore includes legends, superstitions, songs, tales, proverbs, riddles, spells and nursery rhymes; pseudoscientific lore about the weather, plants and animals; customary activities at births, marriages and deaths; and traditional dances and forms of drama which are performed on holidays or at communal gatherings.”²

The word folklore is a combination of the words ‘Folk’ and ‘lore’ meaning ‘community of people’ and learning or knowledge respectively.

1. M.H. Abrams: A Glossary of Literary Terms, page - 70.

2. Ibid., page – 70.

India's speciality is unity and diversity. India has different ethnic and religious groups, hence different cultures. Moreover, India has varieties of language. Therefore, the folklore of India comprises of all the faith and superstition, rituals and customs and oral literature of all the Indians. So to say India is a beautiful bouquet with different flowers.

The folklore of India finds exposure in the writings of many Indian writers. The writers under study, namely, Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Anita Desai also deal with the folklore of India in their novels. A study of folklore in relation to their novels would show their capacity of handling it in their writings.

6.1: Folkloristic Perspective in the novels of Mamoni Raisom Goswami:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami is an Assamese writer by birth, then Indian. Goswami has picked the folklore of Assam first and then crosses the boundary of Assam and employs the folklore of India in her novels. She is an expert in proper use of folklore in her novels. She uses folk beliefs, folk customs, superstitious beliefs etc. as ornaments in her novels.

6.1.1: Folkloristic Perspective in *Chenabor Shrot*:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami's maiden novel *Chenabar Shrot* depicts the continuous struggle in the lives of Harijan workers working under Hindustan Construction Company at Kashmir. The workers are living in temporary camps. The workers, in stead of their poverty have not forgotten their culture. They enjoy whenever they get opportunity to carry forward their culture.

It is mentioned in the novel that the Harijans observe Puspurni or Puspuni festival. This is observed on the purni or puni (Full Moon in English) day of the month of Pus. This is actually a post harvesting festival. On this particular day of Puspurni, the women prepare a special kind of rice cake.

The Harijan women sing a song called ‘Suhag Geet’ on different occasions. Basically Suhag Geet is associated with marriage. They also dance in accompaniment of instrument while singing. Here is an example of a Suhag Geet from the novel:

“Of father, I am telling you

Go and search for my groom ...”³

Another example of Suhag Geet that Soni has sang goes like this:

“Go slowly go slowly Krishna --- I am a spinster

Go slowly go slowly”⁴

The Suhag Geet is also sung at the death of someone’s husband. For example Raghama sings a Suhag Geet at the death of her husband Sadashiva.

The workers believe that flood comes in the month of Baisakh (the first month of Assamese calendar year) as a result of displeasure of Goddess Vaishnudevi. If Vaishnudevi gets infuriated her anger comes down in the form of flood. The workers drink the river water as a religious gesture to please Vaishnudevi.

3. Mamoni Raisom Goswami: Chenabor Shrot, page – 21

4. Ibid., page - 24

The workers also believe that before starting a new project a holy coconut decorated with vermillion and wrapped in a red cloth should be broken to please Vaishnudevi. They consider it as a good sign if it breaks in one hit. It is a signal that everything will be better in the course of the work. Christian Sahib Philip, to respect the feelings of the workers breaks a holy coconut while starting a new work. The novelist writes:

“— Christian Sahib Philip also breaks a holy coconut, decorated with turmeric and vermillion, wrapped in a red cloth in the name of Vaishnudevi.”⁵

The workers also observe Dashera (Durga Puja) festival. The workers are in a festive mood and go to enjoy the festival in group. In the novel there is an instance of the workers going to celebrate Dashera together by a truck to some places near by.

There is a ritual of wiping the vermillion off from a Hindu woman when she becomes a widow. The widow also removes her ornaments as well. The same ritual has been followed in case of Raghama after the death of her husband. Raghama cries to her friends:

“What are you gazing at?

Please wipe off my Sindoor.

Please ...”⁶

5. Ibid., page 28

6. Ibid., page 46

6.1.2: Folkloristic Perspective in Nilakanthi Braja:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *Nilakanthi Braja* can be assessed from a folkloristic perspective. Here, in this novel, she writes about the painful condition of the Radheswami's living desperately in Vrindaban. Vrindaban is the centre of ancient Hindu tradition and culture. It is intensely believed that Lord Krishna played with his companions in Vrindaban. Lord Krishna and Radha myth is associated with Vrindaban.

It is mentioned in the novel that different kinds of festivals are observed at Vrindaban. Festivals such as Krishna Astami, Nandotsav, Jhulan, Radha Astami, Annakut Utsav, Vaikunthi Utsav, Brahma Utsav, Navratri Utsav, Noukaleela, Ramleela, Gajendra Moksh, Tirumanjhan etc. are observed with great enthusiasm.

The devotees observe Krishna Astami to mark the birth day of Lord Krishna. Krishna Astami is followed by Nandotsav. It is a religious belief that Lord Krishna was born at Mathura and in adverse shifted to Nanda's house at Gokul overnight by his father Vasudev. The next day, the people of Gokul celebrated the birth of Krishna at Nanda's house. This celebration is called as Nandotsav.

It is mentioned here that the devotees also observe Annakut festival with the hope that there would be no scarcity of food throughout the year. For this festival various foods are prepared. The devotees throng in the temple campus to offer prayers to joint Radha Krishna idol and have a look at the food offered to God. It is believed that a look at the food will solve their food crisis throughout the year.

One Radheswami has shouted at another:

“Look, look with open eyes, one glance at the annakut will solve your food crisis.”⁷

The Hindu widows believe that death in Vrindaban will bring eternal peace to their souls. Therefore the widows live in the Vrindaban with a hope to die there in hope of getting salvation after death.

6.1.3: Folkloristic Perspective in *Datal Hatir Uye Khowa Howdah*:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *Datal Hatir Uye Khowa Howdah* is set on Amranga Sattrra of Kamrup district of Assam. The novel shows the socio-economic scenario of the society. The novelist has depicted Assamese culture in detail in the novel. Goswami mentions beliefs and disbeliefs, customs and rituals prevalent in the society.

The Assamese people basically the Brahmin consider the widows as inauspicious. The society has put restrictions on the food habit, dress and community relationship of the widows. The widows cannot wear colourful dress. They cannot wear ornaments. They have no right to make them look beautiful. They are destined to wear a gloomy outlook.

The Brahmin widows cannot consume non-veg food items. They cannot eat onion, garlic, ginger, meat, fish etc. They are not allowed to enter into the family

7. Mamoni Raisom Goswami: Nilakanthi Braja, page – 44.

kitchen. For instance, on the day Giribala comes back as a widow to her parents house, she is about to enter the kitchen. At that very moment Durga debar her shouting:

“You cannot go there. The fish cooking pan is kept there.”⁸

The society considers the widows as impure. Therefore the society does not allow them to participate in any religious ceremonies. Their presence in all good occasions is considered as evil. If anything goes wrong the first finger raised is towards a widow though she may not be directly present on the spot. The widow cannot take part in wedding ceremonies.

It is considered as a sin for a Brahmin widow to touch even the shadow of other person. The widows take care so that such unexpected incidents do not take place. Even then if they touch, then they have to purify themselves by taking a bath. In the novel, this unwanted incident happens in the life of widow Durga. Durga a strict follower of rules somehow touches the shadow of Christian Mark Sahib and immediately goes to the well for taking a bath. The novelist explains:

“Durga was horrified as if she had stepped on a snake, she had found to her horror that Mark Saheb’s shadow had fallen on her body! A foreigner’s shadow on a Gohain widow. She fled immediately to the well and prepared for the second bath.”⁹

8. Mamoni Raisom Goswami: *Datal Hatir Uye Khowa Howdah*, page 24

9. *Ibid.*, page 56

It is believed that a touch from a widow can bring misfortune to a happily married woman. Therefore a married woman should not touch the widows. The novelist writes how one day someone has asked not to touch widow Giribala:

“Don’t touch! Don’t touch! She is a fresh widow. Don’t touch her you married woman with vermillion (sindoor). Don’t touch! Don’t touch” ¹⁰

The Assamese society believes in evil stars, horoscope, unsatisfied soul etc. It is mentioned in the novel that Durga’s mother-in-law considers her as evil in the life of her son. Durga’s mother-in-law complains that the evil star that existed in Durga’s horoscope has led to her son’s untimely death.

The novel depicts the observation of different festivals in an Assamese society. For example- Puhani Biya, Basanti Puja, Ambubachi etc. There are strict rules to be followed during Ambubachi in Assamese society.

Fishing in group is a part of Assamese culture. The women go for fishing in group and sing folk songs. It is mentioned in the novel.

There are other instances of using folklore in this novel. For example, a common belief associated with sneezing is mentioned in this novel. It is considered evil to sneeze at someone’s departing time. In this novel once Indranath rebukes Kaltum Manohar for sneezing while he is about to go out for some purpose. Indranath shouts

10. Ibid., page – 23

at Kaltu Manhout:

“You dog! Is this the time for your sneezing.”¹¹

There is purification system prevalent in Assamese society. If someone does anything sinful he has to undergo purification (prayachitta in Assamese) as mentioned in the novel. When widow Giribala eats non-veg she has to undergo purification. The novelist writes:

“She was pulled forcefully towards the well. The priest sprinkled purified water on Giribala at intervals while chanting Sanskrit mantra.”¹²

The Assamese Brahmin society considered puberty attained girls as impure for marriage. Therefore it was customary to marry off young girls before attaining puberty. It is mentioned in the novel that Giribala was married off against her consent before reaching puberty. It is also learnt from the novel that Indranath is confused whether to marry Elimon or not as she has already reached her puberty.

The food habits of the Assamese people are part of folk culture. The Assamese people eat rice, flattened rice, puffed rice, curd, milk, molasses, black grain, fish, meat etc. In social feasts the Assamese people have their food on green banana leaves.

In *Datal Hatir Uye Khowa Howdah* Goswami has used the language suitable for the society she has mentioned. Here in this novel folksongs and words used to

11. Idid., page – 35

12. Idid., page – 117-118

abuse in Assamese society has occupied a significant role. Many household goods used by the Assamese people such as pira (small and flat wooden stool used for sitting), barpira (larger than small and flat wooden stool) are mentioned in the novel.

6.1.4: Folkloristic Perspective in Mamore Dhara Tarowal:

Mamoni Raisom Goswami's *Mamore Dhara Tarowal* can be analysed from a folkloristic perspective. The Harijan workers while shifting from one to another working place, carry their culture along with them.

It is mentioned in the novel that the labourers observe Narayan Puja. They prepare themselves for the puja. They come with a festive mood to participate in the puja. First they offer local wine to God. They hail in the name of Narayan.

It is also mentioned in the novel that the Harijan laborers observe Dandeswari Puja, Masan and Kahar Dak Puja.

Here, like in *Chenar Shrot*, the belief associated with cracking holy coconut is found. The company management and workers believe that before starting a work a holy coconut must be broken in the name of God.

The Harijans were considered as untouchable. Harijan woman Basumati says:

“They give us water beyond their bamboo fence as if we were animals. How can they understand that once Gandhi had drunk water from my mother.”¹³

13. Mamoni Raisom Goswami: *Mamore Dhara Tarowal*, page – 60

Again the novelist mentions how a dying Brahmin in hunger has secretly eaten bread from horijan Sibu Dhasla in fear of losing his caste.

The novelist mentions the belief regarding the touch of a Harijan. Some people believe that silver becomes pure by the touch of a Harijan. The novel narrates how one day Harijan Laxman accompanied Brahmin Munchi to one upper class Kayastha family. They were offered food. To the utter disbelief of Laxman Sing he was served food on silver dishes whereas Brahmin Munchi on brass.

Laxman looked helpless but all asked him to eat. On their way back home Munchi explained Laxman the reason behind offering him food on silver dish. Munchi informed him that the silver dishes of the kayasth household had been purified by the touch of Laxman, Harijan. Munchi said:

“Don’t you know that silver becomes pure touch of a Harijan? All the silver dishes have been purified by your touch.”¹⁴

The novelist mentions another folk belief associated with a dead cow. Some people believe that carrying the headbone of a dead cow is an ill.

The novelist mentions a belief associated with death. According to the tradition of the Pasi community if someone dies the body should be floated into the river. For example when Sibu Lengera’s wife has died of measles her body is floated in the river after observing some rituals.

14. Ibid., page 19

6.1.5: Folkloristic Perspective in Chinnamastar Manuhto:

Chinnamastar Manuhto is set on the Kamakhya temple of Assam. The plot of this novel is blood sacrifice in this particular temple of Assam. The novelist draws a pen picture of Assamese culture and religious beliefs in the novel.

The novel is based on the myth associated with Kamakhya temple. The myth is that Lord Shiva's wife Sati sacrificed her life in a tuff situation at her father Daksh's puja or Yagya. Sati could not bear up her father's insulting behavior towards her husband and welcomed death. The news of Sati's death infuriated Lord Shiva and he started a destructive dance called tandava. He placing Sita's dead body on his shoulder, started for a journey. Lord Vishnu could foresee the consequence and decided to separate her body parts one by one with his disc. Sati's body parts had fallen in different places. It is believed that Sati's vagina (yoni or genital) fell in the Nilachal hills and later on Kamakhya temple has been built here. Kamakhya temple is considered as a famous peethsthan of India.

It is mentioned in the novel that Durga puja, Madan Chaturthi, Kumari puja, Devadhani etc. are observed at Kamakhya temple. The novelist illustrates that many festivals, Durga puja, Nawanna, Rajrajwari puja, Sathe rat, are also observed at Kamakhya.

The Ambubachi is observed in Kamakhya temple for continuous three days. The Ambubachi fair is organized every year in the third month of Assamese calendar year comprising of twelve months. Thousands of devotees throng to participate in this holy occasion. It is believed that Goddess Kamakhya has menstruation circle once in a

year and hence become impure. The temple door remains closed for three days and opened only on the fourth day for the visitors.

The devotees believe that Goddess Kamakhya can fulfill their wishes. Therefore to please Goddess Kamakhya animal sacrifices are made. Surprisingly it is believed that human blood can satisfy the Goddess more easily.

The novelist mentions a religious belief associated with the killing of a cow. The Hindus worship the cow as a sacred animal. If an Assamese Hindu kills a cow however unintentionally, he has to go for penance. The process of penance includes the wearing of a cow rope around the neck of the killer. The sinner has to respond by bleating instead of his voice. He has to go for begging for alms for a long time to get rid of his sin.

In the novel it is mentioned that Devadhani festival is observed at Kamakhya temple. Basically Goddess Manasa (the Goddess of snake) is worshipped through Devadhani festival. Manasa puja is done with vermillion, turmeric, bamboo, fruits etc. Animals are sacrificed to propitiate the Goddess.

It is a religious belief that there are some special agent called Deodha for every God and Goddess. For example – Deodha of Shiva, Deodha of Ganesh, Deodha of Kubera. Deodha's dance in front of their respective God or Goddess. They dance wearing garlands of Tulsi and flower on their heads and necks and also holding swords in hands. The devotees can also reach God and Goddess through worshipping the Deodhas. It is believed that the Deodha is disturbed the God and Goddess will be displeased.

The observation of kumari puja at Kamakhya temple is mentioned in the novel. The devotees believe that at Kamakhya temple Goddess Kamakhya appears as a virgin. That is why to please the Goddess kumari puja is observed. The most important thing is that at kumari puja living virgins are worshipped as Goddess.

The above discussion on the novels of Mamoni Raisom Goswami from a folkloristic perspective shows that her novels are rich with folkloric aspects. She uses folk beliefs, folk customs, and superstitious beliefs etc. as ornaments in her novels. On the contrary Anita Desai does not show much concern about the folklore in her major novels excluding *Fasting, Feasting*. Yet Desai's novel can also be discussed with a view to find out the folkloric aspects in them.

6.2: Folkloristic perspective in the novels of Anita Desai:

Anita Desai's novels also have folkloric aspects. But she does not show much concern about the folklore in her major novels except in *'Fasting Feasting*. Yet Desai's novels can be discussed with a view to find out the folkloric aspects in them.

6.2.1: Folkloristic perspective in *Cry, the Peacock*:

Anita Desai has mentioned the folk belief in astrology in India in her maiden novel *'Cry, the Peacock'*. Desai has illustrated the belief in many Hindus regarding the influence of the stars in the life of people. For instance, Maya, the female protagonist believes blindly in horoscope. Maya, being a very sensitive woman falls in the whirlwind of the Albino horoscope reader's prophecy and suffers immensely. She is unable to bring herself out of her misery.

Desai has used the prophecy of the Albino astrologer as a tool to bring out the tragedy of the novel. The protagonist Maya strongly believes in the Albino astrologer's prophecy that either she or her husband would die in the fourth year of her marriage. The Albino astrologer said:

“Deaths” to one of you when you are married and you shall be married you. Death – an early one- by unnatural causes – the child must my duty—four years left – fear God... Four years after your marriage ---fear God.”¹⁵

It is the prophecy of the Albino astrologer that gives birth of a neurotic Maya. This prophecy has lasting impact on the psyche of Maya. Maya becomes insane. Maya suffers from anxiety of death. The prophecy has brought all the miseries to the life of Maya.

6.2.2: Folkloristic perspective in Bye-Bye Blackbird:

Desai has used folk poetry in her novel Bye-Bye Blackbird. The example of a folk poetry is extracted below from the first chapter:

Half a pound of tuppenny rice

Half a pound of treacle,

Mix it up and make it nice.¹⁶

15. Anita Desai: Cry, the Peacock, page 31-32

16. Anita Desai: Bye-Bye Blackbird, page 12

Again in chapter III Adit sings a folk song to express his mental condition. Adit sings:

When I was a bachelor I lived by myself,

And all the bread and cheese I got, I laid upon the shelf

The rats and the mice, they made such a life

I had to go to London to buy me a wife.¹⁷

6.2.3: Folkloristic perspective in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*:

Desai's novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* can be discussed from a folkloristic perspective. In part one of the novel, that is Monsoon'67' the novelist mentions about the folk belief in magic. The female protagonist Sita believes in miracle.

Sita, the wife of Raman is a contented mother of four children. Now she is in her advance stage of pregnancy again. Sita has much enjoyed her motherhood. Binoy an experienced and loving mother she feels that children are blessing of God. But by the time of her fifth pregnancy, she is getting tired of childbirth. Now a days Sita's relation with her husband is not smooth. She is emotionally hurt and hence frustrated. Also the town life of Bombay makes her bore. She decides not to give birth of her fifth

17. Ibid., page 68

child but to keep him inside her womb. By doing so, she will not bring an innocent child to the cruel modern world. The tense situation between Sita and her husband Raman is also one of the reasons behind her decision of not giving birth of her baby.

Sita decides desperately to keep her baby unborn. She believes that it is possible only at Manori Island because her father had made it an island of magic once, worked miracles of a kind. Therefore she decides to go to Manori Island ‘in order to achieve the miracle of not giving birth’.

Sita’s father stayed with his family at his house ‘Jeevan Ashram’ (the House of the Soul) at Manori Island. The people of the island including his chelas (disciples) believed that he had the art of doing miracles. They were of the view that Sita’s father had the secret power of “miracle cures”. They called him a saint, a charlatan and a wizard. To quote:

“His chalas called him a saint, his critics a charlatan, the villagers a wizard and each produced evidence to prove his theory.”¹⁸

Sita firmly believed that at Manori she would be able to keep her child unborn. It is the magical power of the island itself that will help her to stop the natural process of birth. Sita looks at the island with anticipation:

“She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby safely unborn by magic.”¹⁹

18. Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, page – 28

19. *Ibid.*, page

6. 3: Conclusion:

The above discussion on the folkloristic perspective in the novels of Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Anita Desai has brought into light that both the writers have expressed their love for Indian culture, custom, religion and folklore in their novels. It must be noted that Mamoni Raisom Goswami is much concerned about the folklore of India. On the contrary Anita Desai has not given much importance to the aspects of folklore in her novels.

Thus Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Anita Desai express their love for Indian culture, custom and folk beliefs in their novels.
