

GENDER AND PERFORMATIVITY IN SELECT TRANSLATED SHORT STORIES OF INDIRA GOSWAMI

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Feminists like Judith Butler (1990) suggests that gender is basically a cultural and societal production, which is formed in the dominant line of power and knowledge. She further argues that gender is constructed on the basis of role or performance of an individual in accordance with the cultural situation in a particular location. Gender and performativity are accepted by the society if they conform to the societal values and rules. But the performativity is also open 'to negotiation and alteration, to conflict and contest.' (Pramod Nayar).

This article attempts to study two select translated short stories of Indira Goswami, a notable woman voice of Assam from the point of view of gender and performativity. The two select short stories of Indira Goswami-*Purification "Sanskaar"*, and *A city in its Nakedness* are beautiful translations of Gayatri Bhattacharyya published in her collection named *Relive Indira Goswami. Purification "Sanskaar"* portrays the plight of a beautiful but poor woman Damayanti and the performativity of a childless man to win social recognition by fathering a child. Again in *A City in its Nakedness* expresses the modern condition of a lonely woman. Frustration and loneliness are the usual suspects for the denigration of the present society. The social game of representation has been dutifully performed by the men and the women in the texts. It will also argue that gender and sexuality are no longer individual impulses or biological orders but are culturally embedded. This paper proposes to adopt analytical methodology using both primary and secondary sources.

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Feminists like Judith Butler suggests that gender is basically a cultural and societal production, which is formed in the dominant line of power and knowledge. She further argues that gender is constructed on the basis of role or performance of an individual in accordance with the cultural situation in a particular location. Gender and performativity are accepted by the society if they conform to the societal values and rules. But the performativity is also open 'to negotiation and alteration, to conflict and contest.'(Pramod Nayar). Gender in this sense is easily mutable and malleable. When someone feels like being empowered to resonate one's feeling then gender does not become performance. It is not a construct then. It works in accordance to its free will. Judith Butler's works *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies that Matter* (1993) and *Excitable Speech* (1997) give compelling explanations to gender and identity in general as performative. In this article an attempt shall be made to highlight gender and performativity taking into consideration the translated short stories of Indira Goswami.

The performativity of gender is in part negotiated through the question of identity, desire and societal demands. The article will also highlight the old cultural beliefs and practices concerning gender though no longer dominant but still influential and emergent ones.

Relive Indira Goswami is a translated text by Gayatri Bhattacharyya, in which some of the excellent short stories by Indira Goswami have been incorporated. Most of the short stories of Indira Goswami are women centric delineating north eastern cultural ethos and embodied experiences of women in general. In order to translate Goswami's literary creations in Assamese one needs to have a first hand experience of Assamese culture and a thorough knowledge of Assamese language. The translated text does not appear to be a translation rather appears to be the translator's original. This proves that Bhattacharyya has internalised Assamese cultural ethos and genuinely loves the work of Goswami. The translated text has therefore attracted the attention of the readers. This quality has been stated thus, "most translators judge the success of a translation largely on the degree to which it does not read like a translation. In this view, the reader might be unaware he/ she was reading a translation unless alerted to the fact."(Landers 49) The texts of Indira Goswami are cultural texts as they are able to define the nuances of societal structure of Assam specifically and also of the present day India. Garima Kalita therefore states that "Mamoni R Goswami's authenticity and credibility as an author are verified by various elements like purely poetic metaphors that transmit the reality element into focused crystalline paradigms of signs." (Kalita 114)

Decoding the *saanskar*:

The two short stories that have been selected here may be read from the perspectives of gender (a favourite space of Goswami's literary creations) and performativity. A drama's success depends on the performance of the actors. If they perform well the audience responds well. But what kind of performance can be expected in a literary creation? The gender norms become central in the theatrical sense of performing by the characters in a literary discourse. The performativity of gender is in part negotiated through the question of identity, desire and societal demands. In *Purification Sanskaar*, Indira Goswami projects the merchant Pitambor's desire of fathering a child and leaving an heir to his vast property. This desire of having a child is juxtaposed with his desire to have the beautiful Damayanti, the widow of the dead priest Shambhu. Whenever Damayanti passes by, his lecherous glances fall at her. Krishnakanta, the scheming priest understands the significance of Pitambor's gaze and seeks out a chance to satisfy him for the exchange of some money. "If you think that you can help me with some money, I too will help you to get what you desire." (Bhattacharyya 7) On the other hand the wailing wife of Pitambor who is bedridden knows the intention of her husband. She is inexorably rotting in her bed but her brain and eyes are active. She feels that something wrong is cooking up under her nose. She performs to be quite alert with her 'fiery look' and but at the same time her glances evoke the sense of loss and betrayal. She cannot liberate herself from the accusations piercing her all the time...the unfulfilled desire/expectation to be a mother. "The human actor has specific projects, things she aims to accomplish, ways she aims to express herself, made her mark on the world, transform her surroundings and relationship." (Young105). Pitambor's wife's performativity is awkward in relation to her desire to be the respectable wife. Her incapacity of mothering a child makes her insecure. She knows that being the socially wedded wife of Pitambor she has the full right over him. But she slowly loses her control over him as she cannot gift him a baby. On the other hand the performativity of Pitambor rests on sexually motivating Damayanti to come to him and bear his heir. His ailing wife is transformed into the devalued 'other'. "The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mimics sex or is otherwise restricted by it." (Butler 7). Pitambor and Krishnakanta devalue not only the ailing wife but also they devalue Damayanti. Her condition of penury makes them believe that she will come to their clutches for a little material support which leaves a scope to argue that gender is not merely a difference but a hierarchical division founded on material oppression and exploitation. The story has been set

in rural Assam with strict caste differences among the people. Indira Goswami portrays the priest (Krishnakanta) as 'mischievous and malicious' whose performativity lies in material gain with his cunning schemes. Though he too sets his eyes on the youthful body of Damayanti, he restricts himself from moving further for material gain. His performance here is therefore context specific.

Damayanti is recognized by the society as a fallen woman, "everyone knew that she was a woman of loose character....she is the centre of attraction for all the young men in the village."(Bhattacharyya 3) The cultural milieu identifies her as an object, to be viewed sexually and enjoyed as a commodity. Damayanti agrees to meet Pitambar so that she can feed her starving daughters by earning some money and consequently becomes pregnant. His wife is transferred to the *dheki* room (an Assamese traditional contraption for pounding rice) where she is left to die alone without any care. This behaviour of Pitambar reveals the naturalizing aspect of inequality between the sexes. He is the incontestable authority to decide the fate of his wife and Damayanti. But here Damayanti's strange decision of aborting the foetus of Pitambar changes the very notion of the power of feudalism and male authority. Judith Butler opines, "Identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results." (Butler 24). By aborting the baby she revolts against patriarchy, she decodes the social performance of her gender as alterable. Pitambar is shocked and acts like a madman digging up the grave of his heir. Thus *Saanskar* is decoded and purification buried. Judith Butler thus states, "Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a transcendence of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure."(Butler 238) In this short story the false pride of Pitambar resting on his wealth and masculinity dies a natural death with his last hope being buried by Damayanti. Damayanti's performance as a poor but assertive woman breaks the phallogocentric or the pervasive symbolic order represented by Krishnakanta and Pitambar.

Nakedness Unveiled:

In the other short story *A City on its Nakedness* Urmila Bhattacharyya, whose husband deserted her is surrounded constantly by her male friends at her flat in Delhi. A deserted, alienated and melancholic woman, she gains some sort of stability in her life with her new job as a 'lecturer in the Hindi Department of Delhi University'. At the same time she likes to

engage herself in social service. Recently she adopts a boy whom she finds accidentally in the slums in Okhla. Journalist Rupchandra and Professor Thakur are the frequent visitors to her place. The writer comments, “As they sat together, Rupchandra waited—almost willed, for professor Thakur to go away and leave him alone with Urmila, and Thakur thought that the journalist would leave. The two men indeed were friends, but at such moments they became the worst enemies.” (Bhattacharyya 145) Gender is like signs because Urmila is a beautiful woman and she becomes the victim of male gaze. She performs as the woman host whose responsibility is to satisfy her guests. She knows the intention of her guests but she cannot drive them away as they are her colleagues. They also expect from her the performance of a willing woman, a mere observer, a listener. “Social structures are inherently—but not essentially—inflected by inequalities of power. Since these inequalities have no real basis, no justification, no ethical or moral grounding, anything will do to sustain and rationalize them.” (Bal 530) Urmila tries to find solace with Jagannath, the boy she picked up. She also gets him admitted in a school.

Urmila’s old charm Jasowant, a research fellow appears before her. She feels that “Jasowant was the only man who would create a new world for her in place of the life that had been ruined by her errant husband.” (Bhattacharyya 150) She wants Jasowant to be her man in life. When he visits her house she expects him to express his feelings towards her. He ultimately says, “I want to make our relationship deeper than it is, put it on a firmer base.” (Bhattacharyya 152) After hearing this, a feeling of ecstasy overwhelms Urmila. But a strange/bizarre occurrence transforms the concept of such ideal life dreamt by Urmila. Jasowant screams at her, “Give me sex! You have to give me sex!” The flabbergasted Urmila utters, ‘Sex?’ Jaswant replies, “Yes, only sex can immortalize it.”(Bhattacharyya 152) Once again Urmilla is betrayed by a man whom she loves dearly but for the man love is just sex. Her life is once again shattered. Therefore Stevi Jackson states that “sexuality validates danger: femininity equates with attractiveness to men; sexual conquest of women confirms masculinity.” (Jackson 139). The conventional authority makes Urmila a woman, she has to be cautious of the coercive and constraining society filled with men like Jasowant. She must share the threatened reality and strange feminine identity. She now concentrates on her adopted son Jagannath. He starts taking care of her “who now seemed to become her only medium of expression, of support...” (Bhattacharyya 153) Rupchandra and Professor Thakur are also like hawks ready to jab at her at the slightest chance but since both of them are together most of the time that chance does not come and Urmila is indulged in the ritualistic

performance of femininity in front of them which she of course does not choose but is forced to negotiate. Jagannath gets tired of the voyeuristic gaze of the male friends of Urmila and bursts open the door one day accusing her of spending so much time with these ‘wicked and selfish men’. Jagannath is conscious that Urmilla has been continuously exploited by these men. Their main concern is her youthful body. Unlike Jasowant who expresses his desire violently, these two men try to express theirs in a subtle way. Jagannath utters one sentence, “There is no difference between those bad women living in the slums and you”; he bangs the door and goes away. He is angry with Urmila as she cannot assert herself. Jagannath perhaps is the single person who realizes the nakedness of the city which makes a single woman vulnerable whether privileged or unprivileged. This naked city exposes the “multiplicity of marginalizations among women” (Essed 82) of all classes. “In this process of reiterated gendered performance, some persons become constituted as abject, outside the heterosexual binary.”(Essed 104) Urmilla is left alone and devastated. Unable to bear the loneliness she goes to the slum to get back Jagannath. Jagannath, now a grown up boy returns to Urmilla. He starts living with his second mother but is disturbed at her increasing depression. Observing Urmilla’s loneliness he once more jumps to a rash action by dragging Jasowant to Urmilla and pushes him to her room. Jagannath too misunderstands Urmilla. Thinking her to be suffering from unfulfilled sexual desire, he gets Jasowant for her. The society consists of old cultural beliefs and practices though no longer dominant but still influential and emergent ones. The male members perform as the subjects, they forge the hegemony, the dominant group in the society. The ritualistic performance of femininity and masculinity can be viewed in every formation of the world.

In the two short stories gender becomes a ‘performative construct’. Pitambar’s bedridden wife, Damayanti and Urmila are the products of the power structure which produces the feminine gender and expects it to act accordingly. Pitambar’s socially wedded wife knows that he has set his eyes on Damayanti and she will be treated as left over food. She is now the deviant, the rejected one. Damayanti, a poor but independent and shrewd woman knows that Pitambar after exploiting her body will kick her out, so she aborts his child. Damayanti challenges Pitambar’s pride and masculinity. She does an identity of her own that she can act according to her own will. On the other hand Urmilla performs according to the cultural codes of the society she lives in. She never raises her voice against the two male visitors who are always under the sexual compulsion of seducing her and the third one whom she loves betrays her with his sexual perversion.

Indira Goswami's translated short story collection speaks boldly the voices which are silent for ages and ages. Her short stories speak of women's marginalized space which she feels that could not be changed without structural transformations of gender roles, identities and relations. The social and cultural milieu do not let them speak for themselves. The behavioural performance of gender in different situations have been shown in defining ways. The discussed short stories reveal the varied ways of gender performativity according to social positioning and hierarchies of power. The translator Gayatri Bhattacharyya has been successful in 'carrying across' the inherent meaning of the original tone and intent of the short stories of this legendary writer without distortion. The translated work has met the required transparency of the original which speaks boldly but subtly the experiences, identities, practices and representations of women in this part of the world.

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