

The Rhetoric of Body, Disease and Disability in Indira Goswami's *Under the Shadow of Kamakhya*

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Abstract

Body becomes a site for control, oppression and a mechanism to regulate hegemonic power discourses and also aids in understanding the various manipulative forces that work against it. This article critically examines Indira Goswami's Under the Shadow of Kamakhya to interrogate the nexus between body, disability and disease that pushes one to the margins. The protagonist Padmapriya suffers from leprosy and she uses her body as a tool for negotiation with self and society in order to fight the constructed mechanisms that exist in the system. The body allows her to think her subjectivity and turn the body as a site of power, resistance and counter narrative. Through the fictional representations of Padmapriya and the midget Saeng, 'the disabled' who do not conform to the received perception of 'normalcy', this article investigates and interrogates the rhetoric of body in terms of disease and disability and situates the text as a dialogue to deconstruct hegemonic discourses of normality.

Keywords: Body; disease; construct; normalcy; disability

Dr. Indira Goswami, popularly known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami was an acclaimed Indian novelist, short story writer, editor and an academician from the state of Assam. Although she primarily wrote in Assamese, majority of her works are available in English Translations. Her works usually portray the sufferings of women in a rigid social framework and through her writings she questions the underpinnings of patriarchal dogma, constructed ideologies and other power structures that limit women's freedom. Apart from looking at her oeuvre in terms of psychoanalytical, socio-cultural and eco-critical perspectives, scholars have trained their lenses on feminist concerns, marginalization, and issues pertaining to female sexuality, the body and resistance to oppression. One unexplored aspect that informs Indira Goswami's writings is the representation of disease and disability that feature in her powerful short story, *Under the Shadow of Kamakhya* that this article attempts to examine through various critical and theoretical modes. Drawing inferences from the text, the paper looks into the dynamics of body politics so as to situate and problematize the constructed ideologies produced and proactively disseminated in the social order. An exploration of the text from the critical perspective of bodily ailment and disability studies, merits examination, hence the relevance of the present appraisal.

Goswami's *Under the Shadow of Kamakhya (USK)* is a short story which appeared in an anthology of eight short stories titled *The Shadow of Kamakhya* first published in 2001. The story revolves around the protagonist Padmapriya who suffers from leucoderma, a kind of leprosy which causes white spots on her body. As this study focuses on the aspect of body, it is interesting to note that

the story revolves at the backdrop of the historic temple of Devi Kamakhya where the Goddess's body "has the heavy menstrual flow." The Assamese title of the story, *Devipithat Tej* refers to the blood; the menstruating blood or the bloodshed through animal sacrifices as a religious practice at the shrine located at Guwahati, Assam.

Padmapriya's bodily ailment prompts her husband Bhuvaneshwar to disregard and send her to her parental home. This causes psychological trauma to Padmapriya and her parents. She feels betrayed by her body as the diseased condition uproots and dislocates her, causing much agony and silent suffering. Although the white spot is visible only at the back, the body has become a site for Padma's exclusion from marital life. She is looked at as an object of 'burden,' 'pity' and 'gaze' for the predatory onlookers. Padma's acute sense of isolation and marginalization is captured through the repeated image of Padma confining herself in a dark room and looking through the window, symbolizing escape and hope. The story moves with her engagement in picking white flowers in the forest to keep her occupied. She takes the help of Saeng, the midget to accompany her through the forest and the priest Sambhudev whom she encounters in this process. As the narrative unfolds, there is recurring description of bodily images; the diseased body of Padma, the deformed body of Saeng and the masculinity of Sambhudev. Preconceived social constructions of identity, normalcy or normality regulate binary divide and related norms and affect patterns of social behaviour and attitude. As Lennard Davis observes in *Disability Studies Reader*:

We live in a world of norms. Each of us endeavours to be normal or else deliberately tries to avoid that state. We consider what the average person does, thinks, earns, or consumes. We rank our intelligence, our cholesterol level, our weight, height, sex drive, bodily dimensions along some conceptual line from subnormal to above-average. We consume a minimum daily balance of vitamins and nutrients based on what an average human should consume....There is probably no area of contemporary life in which some idea of a norm, mean, or average has not been calculated. (1)

This determining factor makes one dwell in a constant engagement in processing the bodily fulfil the constructed norms of normal body, beauty and health ideals. The recurrent image of Padmapriya's constant effort to erase the white spot and get back to normalcy and to be accepted, is sprinkled across the text. "She shivered as the cool breeze touched her bare skin. Then she twisted around, with the mirror held out behind her, and strained to catch a glimpse of the small spot on her back" (USK 42). The effort to erase the white spots becomes a routine unconscious process. "Padma returned to her dark and lonely room. Her hand unconsciously returned to that spot on her back. And the nails returned to their futile task of trying to erase the mark" (46). Padma's constant negotiation and dialogue with self and the body shows her desire to escape from that body which has devastated her life:

Often, she would stand before the mirror and try to examine the white spot on her back.... In that dark room she could hardly see anything at all, but still she would persist...The white spot appeared to have remained unchanged. It had not increased, nor had it decreased. Slowly, rhythmically, she began to rub at the spot, her nails bit into her skin . . . (USK 55).

The repeated image of erasure and looking through the window is suggestive of her desire to escape. In the later part, she transcends from her silent submissive behaviour and appears bold and confident. She uses her body as a site for vengeance and resistance to fight against the atrocities. She captures her husband's attention as directed by her friend Lawonya who says "Men are like wolves. Once they taste flesh they turn into man-eaters . . . Human flesh is intoxicating. And the craze for human flesh is even more powerful in humans than it is among animals" (USK 48). Lawonya arranges for a secret meeting with her husband and whispers her "Don't use words. Try to speak with your body. When a young girl speaks to her lover in this way all his pride, anger, rage, everything disappears. The tiger gets transformed into a sheep" (USK 69). Padma's husband Bhuvaneshwar is in a state of belief that she carries his child in her womb and therefore seeks reconciliation as the 'other woman' cannot bear him a child. It is interesting to note how a woman's

body gains significance only if it can procreate. But the narrative has something dramatic to offer. At the end, Padma transforms into the ferocious goddess; resembling the Devi, the symbol of power. She seeks revenge and vehemently says "This child isn't yours" (*USK* 75). Her husband who comes to take her back, falls like the buffalo that is prepared for the sacrifice. Symbolically, Padmapriya represents the Goddess, the Devi "who feeds on buffalo blood" (*USK* 48) in her wild form of anguish and Bhuvaneshwar, the sacrificed one.

Padmapriya speaks for what it is to be a woman with a diseased body. She becomes a talking point for the community, an object of mere pity, shame, sympathy and gaze. With the rebellious attitude at the end she spurns sympathy and acceptance, and makes her body speak against all atrocities. She realizes her subjectivity, reorients herself to be not just accepted for her bodily responses to procreate and hence declares that the child belongs to Sambhudev. Thus, it is understandable that a woman's body becomes a site to exert manipulative power structures determined by the various institutions of the society. The body of woman is subject to scrutiny, discussion and object of gaze and this worsens if the woman suffers a bodily disease. Padmapriya's body becomes an object of gaze for the guests who visit her father. As she comes to collect the brass tumblers she "could feel the two pairs of eyes staring at her. She felt as if she was being stripped naked. Exposed. Their eyes seemed to scrutinize every inch of her body, searching for the white spot. Yes, they were searching her naked body for the white spot" (*USK* 43). Padma suffers in silence at her double marginalization; as a woman and a woman having a diseased body. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak expatiates on the dilemma:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced...the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (Spivak 287)

Padmapriya speaks with the same body that betrayed her. She converts her body as site of power and weapon to fight. The victimized body becomes a tool for resistance and thereby transforms into a speaking, fighting one. As Catherine Belsey has succinctly stated: "To speak is to possess meaning, to have access to the language which defines, delimits and locates power. To speak is to become a subject. But for women to speak is to threaten the system of difference which gives meaning to patriarchy" (16). In this context Helene Cixous' observation is pertinent:

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve- discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word 'silence' . . . (Cixous 886)

Having Padma's body at the centre and the deformed body of Saeng at the axis and referring to Sambhudev's masculinity, the text has much to explore from the lens of disability studies. The disabled figure is dictated and relegated to a limited function within the realist fiction and often become objects of witness, pity and sympathy by the normal characters. Disability studies interrogate received notions of disablement, the processes of identity formation and the subjectivity of disabled people. Rosemarie in her treatise *Extraordinary Bodies*, attributes gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability to products of same social processes and practices that construct bodies according to ideological structures. With the recurrent portrayal of 'normal' and 'disabled' bodies, Goswami seeks to question the very norms that constitute normalcy which defer the other. A thorough observation of the text makes it clear that Saeng's repetitive appearance to cater to the needs of Padma is a strategy to bring the disfigured to the centre and make him appear active; not a passive being relegated to the margins. In fact, Saeng's deformed/unnatural body gets more literary space in this text. The hierarchal binary divide of beauty/ugly, what is normal, natural and unnatural gets represented in the description of Saeng, the midget, the deformed being. There are multiple descriptions of Saeng's body in the narrative and in fact, he gets introduced through his body.

A middle-aged man was slowly walking up the slope using his folded umbrella as a walking stick. Behind him followed the bent, misshapen form of the midget-Saeng. (USK 42)

. . . Saeng just stood there, grinning broadly with his big yellow teeth. His head was far too big for his body, she noted. (USK 44)

'Who is that following them? The disproportionately large head. (USK 48)

Saeng is described as 'the hair on his head stood up like quills. His face was completely disfigured by pockmarks. (USK 48)

Padmapriya saw Saeng the midget standing atop a huge boulder, the size of an elephant's belly. (USK 57)

Saeng's recurring body images, calls into question the centrality of the notion of disability. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in *Extraordinary Bodies* writes “[d]isability is . . . the attribution of corporeal deviance—not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rule about what bodies should be or do” (6). She contests that disability is the reading of bodily difference in the context of socio-powered relations. The short story, *Under the Shadow of Kamakhya* lays bare the bodily differences against rigid norms and hegemonies of power. Although Saeng is disabled, it is only through him that Padmapriya seeks help and support to hunt the white flowers in the forest. Social exclusion and oppression under the notion of 'desirable' and 'undesirable' in the normative world gets emphasised through Sambhudev's masculine framework against which the diseased and deformed bodies gets 'othered.'

Sambhudev was a well-built man. He was strong and muscular. His muscular body rippled when he moved. It was as if the very idea of masculinity had crystallized and lodged itself within his body. He had the shoulders of a lion. His arms appeared to have been cast out of iron. The hot blood pumping inside him could almost be felt even at this distance . . . (USK 52)

Padmapriya becomes an object of gaze and constructed notions of feminine body. For Sambhudev, the “tiny slip of a girl had been transformed into this breathtaking beauty. It was almost as if another body had been lying dormant beneath the old one and one day the girl had shed her old body and metamorphosed into this” (USK 52). Susan Bordo, a modern philosopher who works on body studies, asserts in her essay titled “Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body” that female body was “a socially shaped and historically 'colonised' territory.” She further adds that “Feminism imagined the human body as itself a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped and marked by histories and practices of containment and control” (250). Padma's diseased body is 'constructed' 'colonised' 'controlled' and becomes an object of gaze for others but a matter of disillusionment for her. She has a complex and troubled relationship with her own body, a body not considered 'normal' in the eyes of the society. Dislocation and disapproval from the social structure, Sambhudev admiration for her feminine body and her engagement in using the body as a mechanism to fight; all reverberate in complex networks of body politics. A careful examination makes us understand that Goswami uses the diseased body and disfigured Saeng to represent the 'diseases' that operate and control under the facade of social order. Disease thus becomes a metaphor in the text which symbolizes external manifestation of our internal maladies. The deformed body of Saeng acts as an allegory to such maladies that require erasure.

Goswami's *Under the Shadow of Kamakhya* thus raises complex questions about feminine subjectivity within the purview of diseased body and disability and its implications at large. The narrative seeks to question the constructed notions of diseased body and disabilities as imperfection and speaks aloud to alter such perceptions. Padmapriya's diseased body and Saeng's deformed body do not conform to standard norms of 'normalcy,' and therefore, relegated to the margins. Davis says, “The 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person . . . One of the tasks for a developing consciousness of disability issues is the attempt, then, to reverse the hegemony of the normal and to institute alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal” (*Enforcing* 4). Leonard J. Davis further elaborates,

“This divine or ideal body is not attainable by a human. When ideal human bodies occur, they do so in mythology. For example Venus and Helen would be the embodiment of female physical beauty. Similarly 'grotesque' is taken in contrast to 'Ideal.' In other words, if 'disabled' body is in binary opposition to 'normal' body, 'grotesque' body was in dichotomous relationship with ideal body (*Enforcing* 5).

A disabled condition comes under the purview of deviance and this arrives when the concept or norm of normal body or normality gets perpetuated in social discourses. The socially constructed binaries of beauty/ugly, normal/deformed, masculinity/femininity are questioned through the representations of Padmapriya, Saeng and Sambhudev. The text critiques such social views and determinants about normality and normalcy. The diseased condition of Padmapriya seems to echo the diseased social framework that operates on constructed ideologies. Disability as a constituted phenomenon is deeply rooted in the structures of power that label normalcy as ideal in social order. The short story *Under the Shadow of Kamakhya* deconstructs this notion and brings out the various cultural processes that enable categorical othering and degenerate them. Thus, the narrative seeks to question disease and disability as imperfection and makes an appeal to reorient and restructure our thoughts. The narrative is a saga of bodily representations, agonies and stigmatization in a 'diseased' society. The bodily representations thus speak in an effort to move to the centre and the text becomes a paradigm for theorising and articulating resistance and struggle against such dominant structures of power.

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