

When Hopes and Dreams are Crushed and Shattered: Women as represented in Lummer Dai's *The Price of a Bride* and Indira Goswami's *The Bride*.

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Abstract

Gumba in "The Price of a Bride" by Lummer Dai represents the shattering experience of a young school girl whose promising future is abruptly interrupted with the sudden revelation of her being sold in infancy by her parents to another family in return for a hefty bride price. Again, Rukmini is the long-suffering lonely bride, whose dreams of a better life with a promising man is left shattered with the news of his tragic accident on her wedding day in Indira Goswami's "The Bride". In these unexpected circumstances that both Gumba and Rukmini are confronted with they must now determine the course of their own journey ahead with the courage to sidestep or even break away from the social customs and traditions as well as norms and sanctions that stifle their sense of self and their own individual identities.

The present paper thus examines the two selected short stories mentioned above which in the original Assamese text were titled "*Koinar Mulya*" and "*Koina*" respectively. It aims to critically examine the represented women characters in their respective social context with an effort to address the social concerns and issues that are evident in the text of the stories. Also, it attempts to highlight how these stories are interwoven with the common thread of the suffering and experience of the two protagonists who are tormented by social injustice and oppression. These compelling stories highlight the ways in which the factors of established social customs and practices, rigid social norms and sanctions, entrenched social beliefs and stereotypes, along with education and progressive development define the social consciousness as well as the qualitative lives of people in a society.

Key words: Assamese short story, Bride, Social customs and beliefs, Wedding, Women.

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1.0 Introduction

"I won't. It is important for me to know when and how I was married."

(The Price of a Bride, p. 10)

[What a horrendous complexion! The coming generations would be filled with children dark as the goddess Kali herself... It would be disastrous to bring home one as elephantine in proportions as her!] *(The Bride, p. 93)*

Syed Abdul Malik in his analysis of the developments of various literary genres in Assamese literature had noted that though the genre of Assamese short story had reached its heights at the end of 1950s, most of the Assamese short story writers had shifted to writing and experimenting with the genre of Assamese novel. Malik opined that much was left wanting in the genre of Assamese short story and that there were hardly any that qualified as truly "outstanding" (p. 30) despite the numerous bulk of stories that had been written during this period. To cite some of the leading Assamese short story writers who had experimented and developed this genre are namely, Atulananda Goswami, Bhabendranath Saikia, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Birinchi Kumar Barua, Chandra Prasad Saikia, Dolly Talukdar, Golap Khound, Imran Shah, Indira Goswami, Jogesh Das, Kanak Mahanta, Lakhinandan Bora, Lalit Bora, Mahim Bora, Sada Saikia, Saurabh Kumar Chaliha, Sayeedul Islam among others. Interestingly, the first crop of fiction or short story writers from Arunachal Pradesh namely Lummer Dai and Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi wrote in Assamese as well given the fact that they had received their education in the Assamese medium and found their creative outlet in their flair for the language. In highlighting the progressive writings of both these writers, Tilottoma Misra in the introduction to *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from the North East India* (2011) significantly notes:

[Lummer Dai and Thongchi have sought to depict the sensitive questioning of the values represented by the traditional institutions which give little space to the voice of the youth and the women.] *(Ibid, p. xviii)*

Margaret C. Zama while discussing the literary treasures and merits of writers from the North East region of India in the introduction to *The Heart of the Matter* (2004) together with its potpourri of cultures and heterogeneity of ethnic

identities considers it necessary to dispel any form of misconception or generalisation in the following words:

[The term "North East" is a geographical, linguistic and ethnic stereotyping that clubs together these often misconstrued, misjudged and misunderstood eight states - Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura - in the northeastern geographical periphery of the Indian union.] (*Ibid*, p. 7)

Zama remarks that it is only through the literary treasures and the significant literary positions assumed by the writers from the North East of India that the prevalence of any form of bias or misconception can be done away with. The present paper takes up two short stories of writers hailing from this region titled *The Price of a Bride* by Lummer Dai and *The Bride* by Indira Goswami which have been translated by Tillotoma Misra and Liza Das respectively from Assamese to English. Lummer Dai's journey from his native village in East Siang to his literary journey as an established fiction writer who was also recognised by the Assam Sahitya Sabha is simply remarkable given his literary credibility, his strong sense of social concern and his valuable contributions to Assamese literature. Similarly, Indira Goswami (also known by her pseudonym Mamoni Raisom Goswami) is considered as one of the most passionate and exceptional woman writers from Assam whose powerful writings have left an eternal imprint on the canons and history of Assamese literature. In fact, Prafulla Kotoky in his discussion on the fiction of Indira Goswami and the humanitarian essence in her literary works writes:

[Her sympathy for the suffering humanity is not doctrinaire, nor is it the offshoot of her belief in any political ideology. She believes ardently in basic human values. At the same time she has shown her impatience with all that stifles life in its continuous growth- the obsolete habits of customs and traditions. She welcomes change which she believes is possible only through compassion and piety, and the inherent goodness of the human heart.] (*Ibid*, p. 68)

In a similar strain, Tilottoma Misra's discussion on the literary contributions and scholarly works of Indira Goswami highlights her sensitivity towards social discourses centered on women and their position in society which also explains why most of her writings portray and represent the plight of women given their

continuous oppression and marginalisation. Many of her works highlight how women are pushed to the margins in society and are being compelled to suffer in silence, and their cherished dreams, while treated as mere puppets in the hands of the patriarchal order and "bound by orthodox values" (p. 30) that stifle their existence. Thus, both the selected stories in the paper take up these issues surrounding two different brides separated by their socio-cultural context but united in the similarities of their oppression, experience, sufferings and ultimate choice.

2.0 An Insight into the Selected Stories

The Price of a Bride begins with a hard hitting statement that reads thus, "I sold the girl quite a few years back" (p. 1) and unfolds the story of a young school-going girl named Gumba who blossoms into youth with her own set of dreams and aspirations in life. She does not have the faintest idea of the 'one' life-changing decision that her parents had taken during her childhood. Kargum decides to call her home and tell her the truth that when Gumba was just a child, she had been sold to another family for a bride price. The young school going finds herself in utter shock and disbelief when the truth is broken to her, finding it difficult to even imagine that her parents could be so cruel and insensitive to conform to such customs as it meant that long before she knew her fate had already been sealed.

To make things worse for the second time in a row, without as much considering the opinion of his wife or the consent of his daughter, Kargum decides that it is time that Gumba quits her schooling so that she can be sent to her rightful place i.e., her 'unfamiliar' husband's home. In his sole 'opinion', the only thing that mattered in the family, it was of no use for a girl to spend so many years studying in school. Besides, he begins to suffer sleepless nights in the fear that the groom's family could refuse to take his daughter in, if his allowing her to attend school continued any longer. Moreover, if their family were to demand the customary bride price that he had taken long ago, Kargum's family would be completely ruined. The story thus, highlights the worries of an illiterate father for his girl child right from the day she is born, his struggles for sustenance, dependence on the bride price, weight of customary traditions together with the tussle of his emotions and rationale both as a father and head of the family. At

the same time, it provides a fresh ground to examine the rigid social customs and established social practices and to question their validity as well as speak up against the social norms as represented through the experiences of both the women characters of Gumba and her mother.

On the other hand, *The Bride* is centered on Rukmini who is considered to have crossed the ideal marriageable age for a young woman in her society. She suffers a lot of humiliation for being rejected several times in the past by many men. Now, these memories are shown to pierce her silent moments like a moving picture and gradually; with time she begins to suffer a sense of low self-esteem for being treated as ineligible or unsuitable for being the perfect bride. However, Haren steps in as her saving grace and following her father's acceptance of the marriage proposal, the date of their marriage is fixed. The word of her marriage spreads quickly in their village and it becomes a topic of discussion and gossip among the village folk. Five years earlier, Rukmini had given up all hopes of being a bride or ever being married but perhaps, a small seed of 'hope' had still remained in her heart. As she is unable to gain a glimpse of Haren on the day of his visit to their home, all that she hears is his captivating voice which instantly creates waves of overwhelming joy and desire in her heart.

She is taken back to the memory of travelling in a bus to her uncle's wedding seven years earlier and her memory of the unforgettable glance of the bus driver had somehow remained in her longing heart. Rukmini is so naïve and innocent that she even reasons and in her mind juxtaposes the image of the bus driver from Nagaon with that of her groom who was also a driver (for she did not know what Haren looked like). She seems to believe that it has to be the same person from her past for no one else according to her could be so interested in her after all these years. However, her new hopes and dreams suffer a rude shock when circumstances take a different turn altogether. On the day of her marriage, the family receives news of Haren's accident in which he loses one of his legs. The sudden misfortune that affects the family leads to much hue and cry as they find themselves in a dilemma after having made all the arrangements for the marriage ceremony. When Boiragi the ascetic takes it on himself to step in as her groom, Rukmini is confronted with the compulsions of making a choice for the first time in all these years that she had longed and waited to be a bride.

3.0 Women Characters as represented in the Short Stories

In *The Price of a Bride*, the characters of Gumba and her mother represents how at times, women in a patriarchal set up or society are silenced in the name of customs and traditions and are taken for granted, particularly when they are economically dependent on their father or husbands. The presence of Gumba's mother is hardly felt until at the end of the story given her suppressed thoughts and silence in such serious matters of her own family. Moreover, the fact that the 'name' of 'Gumba's mother' does not find a mention in the story and that any reference to her means an identity tagged to that of her child, implies how a mother or a wife stands as a marginal figure in her own home. She represents those countless women who had for ages conformed to their traditional customs as well as the dictates of the patriarchal order in society. The only moment when she speaks up for her daughter is when she realises that as her parents they had already caused Gumba much harm and perceives further threat to her daughter's future. Unfortunately, Gumba's mother is also seen to experience the limitations of her circumstances when her husband challenges her to return the bride price to the groom's family in place of their daughter which silences her once and for all.

As a student of twelfth standard, completing her school education meant further access to higher studies and the eligibility to apply for a government job for the young Gumba. Having come of age and filled with her own dreams and desires, the happy-go-lucky Gumba develops feelings for one of her fellow classmates. On her visit home, Gumba learns that her friends Jamay and Yeter who were of the same age had already mothered children of their own. They now shared their difficult stories of being forced and threatened to conform to their family's demands and their customs in silence. In fact, Jamay who had opposed to her being sent away to her husband's home when she was barely a student in the eighth standard was taken to the people's court and then forcibly dragged to sleep with her husband. Even as Jamay had managed to run away, her own family had subjected her to the same torture yet again in complete violation of her rights. In fact, Yabam admitting, "[w]e are rotting here in this village" (p. 6) itself highlights the plight of countless such young girls in the larger society who are deprived of their basic human rights every day. In the story, when Gumba is confronted with the shattering truth of her marriage in infancy she is left completely

distraught and apprehensive of her future. However, she fearlessly speaks up against her father's intention to deny her any form of personal choice and being bent on crushing her own set of dreams and aspirations.

Rukmini in *The Bride* is depicted as a reticent, self-conscious, sensitive and an extremely shy woman who finds it difficult and embarrassing to express her thoughts and desires to anyone else except her confidante Bokul. She is unable to bear the pain of being rejected so many times over simply on the basis of her looks and appearance. Rukmini in her heart harbours an intense desire to be accepted as Haren's prospective bride. However, she is simply unable to express her inner thoughts and desires to her parents or to simply describe her inner turmoil to anyone else. Thus, she falls back on the grace of God and simply relies in her belief that someday her prayers would be answered. Although, Bokul seems genuinely concerned as her friend, yet she is mostly engrossed in her own share of marital anecdotes to even grasp the gripping problems that continuously disturb Rukmini's peace of mind. While Rukmini comes across as a silent person throughout the story there is a lot more that goes on in her mind whether it is her unspoken thoughts, unexpressed joys, flashes of old memories, or bolts of doubt and confusion. She is the obedient daughter who finds it extremely difficult to even utter a word to her parents, to even ask them a question or clarify her doubts let alone express her own opinion. In fact, whatever little information she gathers regarding her marriage is rather through her careful 'eavesdropping' instead of an open discussion for she has no other access to knowing what transpires between her parents and any other visitors at home.

In fact, even as she considers discussing about her marriage with her mother her courage fails her and her heart shrinks as the narrator describes, "[s]he had never before spoken to her mother about her likes or dislikes. How could she talk to her now, and that too on such an embarrassing topic?" (p. 93). Rukmini's mother had perhaps never made her feel comfortable enough to share or open up her own thoughts and feelings. Though, it is evident in the story that Rukmini's mother is genuinely concerned about her daughter's well-being, she does not seem to approach or bring up the topic of marriage with her even once. She fervently prays for the successful passage of her daughter's marriage and makes several offerings on her behalf at the village naamghar for she only wishes the wellbeing of her daughter. As a mother, she also regrets for having just a few

pieces of jewellery to give away to her daughter in marriage but sadly, all the hopes of seeing her daughter as a bride shatters when the sad news of the groom's accident reaches them.

However, in this moment of crisis it is unfair for Rukmini's mother to make an impulsive decision that Boiragi shall become a "householder" (p. 95) from that moment onwards indirectly indicating that he is free to fulfill the role of Rukmini's groom. In the case of Rukmini who had always considered Boiragi as her friend and well-wisher, respecting him as an elderly person and close acquaintance of her family, even the mere thought or any such utterance was a complete blasphemy to her. Towards the end of the story, Rukmini's mother turns extremely hostile and inconsiderate towards her feelings as she is blinded by the greater interests of the family than that of her own daughter. It is precisely at this point that Rukmini breaks her silence to make her decision heard that she would be Haren's bride alone and take everything in her stride instead of being compelled to marry Boiragi of all people. It thus signifies her eventual freedom from her self-constraint as she boldly breaks out of her inner world and the confines of the oppressive social norms to decide the future course of her own life. After all, it is her prerogative to decide the kind of life she wishes to live without having to necessarily give up her hopes and dreams.

4.0 Social Practices, Customs, Beliefs and Stereotypes

Lummer Dai captures the story of a family belonging to the indigenous *Adi* tribe of Arunachal Pradesh that is caught in the trappings of their traditional customs and the compulsions of their own practical needs. They live within their means and limitations without knowing any better than to live in conformity with their old established ways of life in a tribal society. Without the slightest thought or intent of questioning the given social norms or even allowing his family to do the same, it is obvious that Kargum, the father figure is represented as the repressive force in the family. While being tied to his given responsibilities of sustaining his family and maintaining the age old customary traditions, he is seemingly unable to comprehend the enormity of his decisions which he imposes on his young child and his wife. Apparently, all his day-to-day activities is centered around the two defining moments of his life i.e., the year of Gumba's birth and the year she is sold. These events become the two points of reference for Kargum

when he reflects on his cultivating activities, remembers the famine that had struck the land or ponders on the probable age of the trees that he had planted. He even loses count and is rather unsure of the exact age of his daughter. As evident in his request to Minjum to pen a letter on his behalf, Kargum does not know how to read and write and in fact is poor in counting numbers for he finds it difficult to calculate the exact amount that he had long received as his daughter's bride price.

In keeping with the customary traditions and the "marriage negotiations" (p. 2) a hefty bride price was paid by the groom's family in return for a bride which included both cash and kind. As the groom's family had sacrificed ten mithuns, Kargum had paid the price of five of these mithuns in the form of a thousand rupees, brass plates and bowls. This was followed by the 'bride price' for Gumba which comprised five mithuns, seven cows and other bell-metal utensils along with a sum of three thousand rupees, half of which was divided amongst his brothers and kinsmen. Let alone voice her protest, Gumba is even denied the right to know when, how, to whom and for how much she was married or rather 'sold' off for. The narrator describes her position thus, "Gumba began to examine the whole idea of child-marriage. Marriage was actually a misnomer for selling a girl for money. She refused to accept such an arrangement as a marriage in the true sense of the term" (p. 9).

In her story, Indira Goswami captures the subjective experience of a woman who longs to be a bride and to be lovingly accepted in a new home. Rukmini belongs to a humble Assamese family and willingly accepts the customs that precede arranged marriages even as she feels humiliated to be rejected every time with lame excuses as the narrator notes:

[How could she ever forget? The number of times she - like a devotee, in silken attire and holding an offering of betel nuts - had stood in front of many a man each time in the delusion that they would be her saviour] (*Ibid*, p. 87).

In fact, these memories leave a lasting impression on her mind as she is an emotional and sensitive person. Rukmini knows that all eyes were set on her marriage for she becomes tired of answering questions of the village folk in this regard and also senses the tremendous pressure on her family to fulfill their obligations towards her.

Moreover, she knows from all the years of having received "taunts" and "uncharitable looks" (p. 88) of people that everyone seemed to judge her by her appearance alone. Rukmini experiences a sense of inferiority complex owing to her dark complexion and her bodily appearance. In order to seem attractive as a bride, she even observes fasting and toils harder, praying to "become slender and alluring" (p. 88) and to fit into everyone's notion of beauty. However, even as she is seemingly comfortable with her own self, she is made to feel unattractive, unappealing and undesirable as a bride. In fact, it is extremely unfortunate that a woman should be subjected to such stereotypical notions of beauty; being body-shamed and tormented for her appearance. One of the concerns that emerges in the text is how in order to qualify for a bride, a woman is compelled to fit into preconceived notions or standards of beauty in addition to other necessary credentials or accomplishments. In fact, such social stereotypes exist in the literature and mythologies as well such as the description of Rukmini, Lord Krishna's consort in the verses of Rukmini Haran where the beautiful lady is described as:

[What can I say about her abundant beauty?
The moon hides himself at the sight of her fair face.
And, beholding her bewitching eyes,
The shy lotus slips into the waters.] (p. 89)

In her mind, such descriptions of beauty make her feel all the more inadequate and unattractive as though she is the undesirable version of the mythological Rukmini. It is as though she internalises this feeling which makes her feel that her own body "was accursed by God" (p. 90). All that she wishes for is to be married and to be treated with a dignity.

Moreover, her mother unknowingly makes her feel as if she is their liability in the common 'belief' that a mother cannot invite a curse upon herself or her family to have an unmarried daughter at home. While she readily accepts Boiragi's offer to marry her daughter, she sadly turns a blind eye to her own daughter's wishes. Boiragi who sings verses from the Ramayana and Mahabharata in their courtyard is a constant influential presence in the family. He takes everyone into confidence to the point of assuring Rukmini's mother that he is always there to take care of any unforeseen circumstances that may befall her daughter and finally

taking up the responsibility on himself to marry her. The sudden decision of Boiragi to marry Rukmini who he always treated Rukmini like a child and now suddenly decided to marry Rukmini out of the blue which only reflects his own withheld desires. In fact, he turns out to be an opportunist who is undeserving of the respect that Rukmini has for him. Also, this situation highlights how a man is entitled to his liberty, to easily break any form of social norms in order to suit his own needs and desires as and when necessary without being opposed or questioned. Moreover, it also reflects how society makes it difficult for a woman to even exercise her basic rights and to overstep established social beliefs, stereotypes, customs and practices.

5.0 At the Crossroads of Change

As revealed in the conversations of Gumba's friends, even though the course of their lives had already been decided with their bride prices, they express a sense of anger at the injustice that girls like them were commonly subjected to and protest the rigidities of their customary practices that had little consideration for the well-being of a girl or a woman. In fact, even Gumba's friend Libam who had no such experience of being sold for a bride price at a tender age protests against such an unjust practice. In the story, Gumba's mother is presented as an emotional and understanding woman by nature as well as helpless and submissive in her position as Karbum's wife. In contrast to her, these young girls including Gumba represent the voice of the new generation who are mindful, rebellious and progressive in their thoughts standing at the crossroads of tradition and modernity.

Despite the grim circumstances Gumba's challenging words, "[y]ou have done me all the harm possible. Now, it's my turn to do something" (p. 10) provides a ray of hope that she would eventually break out of the social confines to define her own journey and carve out her own identity. In truth, there can never be any sort of 'price' that determines the worth of a bride or a person for that matter. It is only right for the truly educated individual to refuse being enslaved to and to be blinded by any such prescribed social norms and traditions. In this regard, Gumba makes her point clear the moment she says, "Don't you realise, father, that if I'm a slave, your blood has been enslaved? And if your blood is enslaved then you yourself are a slave?" (p. 10). Instead of treating her as a liability, she

thus challenges him to see through her enlightened perspective of life that she receives through her access to 'education' that ironically Kargum himself had allowed her.

Perhaps then, one can also read a sense of optimism in the story and imagine the possibility of Gumba as the rebel bride rather than the helpless young bride sold for a price and weighed down by social norms and practices. Gumba realises that most men in their society considered girls as "their private property" and this is when she precisely declares, "[w]hen a girl is born, they think that they have acquired another piece of property. This custom of trading with girls must be done away with" (p. 7). The act of estimating a young girl's value in terms of her bride price amounts to her being objectified which both degrades and diminishes her true worth as a person. Also, the very act of suppressing one into silence and subjecting an individual to such injustice is unethical and a violation of basic human rights. It is a harrowing experience for a bride to have all her decisions being taken by her family, her groom, groom's family or the society that completely overrides her thoughts and feelings, hopes and dreams.

In the case of the bride Rukmini, she is compelled to bear with the customary visits of prospective grooms all for the sake of her parents despite the pain of being judged each time for her appearance and being at the receiving end of multiple rejections. Throughout the story, she is always spoken for without finding or being given the scope of articulating her own feelings. It is her family and friends who mostly seem to decide what is right for her and influence her thoughts at all times. Moreover, she is shown the fatalistic way of looking at life and made to believe that everything in the world is pre-destined and pre-determined by fate. Therefore, as far as her circumstances are concerned she is made to feel pre-destined for her condition as the unfortunate bride.

As far as her groom Haren is concerned, his circumstances could have been worse if something would have happened to his life but instead of his condition, his inability to make it to the marriage is made a big deal by her entire family and well-wishers. Rukmini's mother seems bent on saving their situation after all the preparations they had done. In this hour of crisis, it becomes more important for them to save the family's reputation in the village at all costs rather than being sensitive or empathic towards the heart broken bride and the injured groom. However, at the end of the story, Rukmini's final 'choice' itself becomes

the most striking moment of her life for it signifies her rebirth and 'change'. It marks the end of her being long taken for granted as well as being subject to shame and silence.

Significantly, as Subhajit Bhadra notes in his conversation with Indira Goswami on her realistic representations of women in her literary works, the writer in agreement states, "Well, this is true, but I have also portrayed male characters with compassion and sensitivity. And it is true that being a woman myself, I could comprehend woman's psyche better" (p. 195-96). In fact, both these significant stories are tied with the common thread of social issues surrounding the core theme of marriage. It highlights one's caged experience and existence in a society steeped in age old traditions that is simply averse to change. The examples set by both Gumba and Rukmini certainly plant seeds of thoughts for many others like them. With their timely intervention and decision that they take under such crucial circumstances they are ready to determine the entire course of their lives. Although they are initially presented as meek and dreamy-eyed, yet they do not remain damsels in distress rather they both emerge stronger from their difficult experiences, empowering themselves and breaking the social constructs.

In the end, they refuse to be defined by anyone and take it in their stride to fulfil their own hopes and dreams despite their setback and sufferings. While depicting how women are sometimes responsible for their own share of sufferings in conforming with the prescribed social norms, these stories also exemplify the role of women in creating their own space, articulating themselves and ushering in their own enlightenment. The stories thus highlight the significance of broadening one's perspectives, voicing oneself with clarity of thoughts, being empathic and fair to others. Also, they highlight the importance of self-acceptance, self-love and the celebration of one's identity together with a healthy balance of old traditions and the modern. Our cultural traditions, values and practices must be healthy and open to embracing change or transformation for a better society.

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