UNIT 1 INDIRA GOSWAMI [MAMONI RAISOM GOSWAMI] : THE EMPTY CHEST
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OBJECTIVES

Assamese literature is known to have excelled in the field of poetry and short stories. This unit is primarily meant to introduce you to this wonderful world of Assamese short stories and to enable you to understand and enjoy a contemporary short story entitled The Empty Chest written by one of the greatest Assamese writers writing today, Indira Goswami. She is popularly known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami, particularly in Assam. Besides unit will give you an idea of Goswami as a woman writer and her literary style as a short story writer par excellence.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Goswami’s stories have a common setting in the southern part of the district of Kamrup in Assam. Her tales have multiple themes in a wavering timeframe spreading through half a century. Although her stories are set in Assam, the universality of the themes, nevertheless, touches the reader to the core. Love and human relationship form the core of most of her stories. The original title of the story chosen for your study is Udang Bakach and is one of Goswami’s much acclaimed short stories. It has been translated into English as The Empty Chest by Pradipta Borgohain. He teaches in the department of English Gauhati University and is also a novelist and a translator. The English translation is available in Katha, Prize Stories, Vol. 3 and also in The Shadow
of Kamakhya, stories by Indira Goswami (Rupa, 2001). The story is reproduced at 1.5.1.

In this Unit, we analyse The Empty Chest critically keeping in view its theme, narrative technique, characterization, atmosphere and symbolism. The story is reproduced below. However it is important to give a general introduction to the history of Assamese short story, and also an overview of Indira Goswami’s writings.

1.2 ASSAMESE SHORT STORY: AN INTRODUCTION

In Assamese literature, as in the case of literature of other Indian languages, modern short story is a pleasant outcome of the influence of the West. Although stories, fables, tales, etc. were first published in the pages of Arunodoi (1846-1870), the first Assamese news magazine published by the American Missionaries, short story in its real sense appeared first only in the pages of Jonaki, the first Assamese magazine in 1892. This was the beginning of renaissance in Assamese literature. Jonaki played a pivotal role in the evolution of Assamese short story. Since the publication of the first short story in 1892 till the modern times the history of Assamese short story could broadly be divided into three periods: Jonaki Yug, Avahani Yug, and Ramdhenu Yug. This division is based on the name of the magazine that had helped in setting new trends in the history of Assamese short story.

Lakshminath Bezbaruah is the father of Assamese short stories. In fact, he is also considered to be the father of Assamese language. It was due to his efforts that the language survived from getting eclipsed under the influence of the Bengali language. It was in the fourth volume of the fourth edition of Jonaki in 1892 Lakshminath Bezbaruah published his first Assamese short story Seuti. In this story Bezbaruah dealt with some contemporary social problems riddled with superstitions. The protagonist of the story was a simple rural woman, but her problems were human and representative of any woman. Bezbaruah’s Sadhukathar Kuki (Basket of Fables) (1890), Surabhi (1910), and Jonbiri (1913) were the first short story collections in Assamese. The contemporary Assamese society was beautifully reflected in his stories and the life-like presentation of the characters drawn from real life made the stories very interesting.

Sharat Chandra Goswami’s name comes second in the discussion of Assamese short stories. Among his contemporaries were Nakulchandra Bhuyan, Lakshminath Phukan, Nagendranarayan Choudhury, Holiram Deka, Lakshmidhar Sharma, Rama Das, Beena Baruah, Trailokya Goswami, Radhika Goswami, Mahichandra Borah, Munindra Borkotoky, Nirmala Devi, Indibor Gogoi, etc. These writers flourished in the pages of Avahani, the second literary magazine that came into existence after Jonaki. Avahani ushered in a new era in Assamese short story writing. The writers of this pre-war period were attracted by western romanticism and the influence of Freud, Young, Edgar Allen Poe, etc. was visible in their writings.

The changes that crept into the domain of Assamese short stories through Avahani continued until the beginning of World War II. Lakshmidhar Sharma was the most significant writer of this period. He beautifully balanced his writings with psychological analyses of the characters of his stories on one
hand, and social awareness on the other. In other words, influence of Freud and Marx found expression in his writings. Literary activities, however, became a victim with the spread of the war. This was a great setback for short story writers because with the irregular publication of *Avahan* during this period they were devoid of a platform for their creative writings.

In the post-war period short story writing blossomed again with the publishing of new magazines like *Jayanti*, *Surabhi*, *Pachowa*, and *Ramdhenu*. The first three magazines, however, could not establish themselves as trendsetters. The emergence of *Ramdhenu* in the post-Independence period came as a great relief to the writers. Under the able editorship of Birendrakumar Bhattacharyya this magazine brought in a whiff of fresh air. Romanticism gave way to realism. Although publication of this magazine stopped sometime in the sixties, the trend set in by *Ramdhenu* is still continuing.

As a result of the war there were changes in the political, economic, social spheres of the country. These changes were reflected in the social structure as well as in the thinking and beliefs of the people. Writers of this period depicted these changes well through their writings. The new breed of writers focused more on the social and psychological conflicts of individuals through ornamental language rather than depending upon simple narratives. Syed Abdul Malik was a pioneer among modern writers. Although he had established himself as a short story writer in the pre-war period, he was a trendsetter in post-war writing also. Uniqueness of theme, sympathy for the downtrodden and the socially neglected, human considerations hidden behind social and religious traditions in society and open, fearless descriptions of sexuality were special features of Malik’s writings.

Among Malik’s contemporaries were Dinanath Sharma, Birendrakumar Bhattacharyya and Jogesh Das who had created a niche for themselves even during the early period of Assamese short story writing. Homen Borgohain, Medini Choudhuri, Bhabendranath Saikia, Lakshminandan Bora, Saurabh Chaliha, Chandraprasad Saikia, Mahim Borah, Nirod Choudhury, Shilabhadra (nee Rebatimohan Datta Choudhury), Nagen Saikia, Arun Goswami, Atulanada Goswami are some of the important writers who have enriched Assamese literature with their short stories during the post-war and in the post-independence period. With rural as well as urban society serving as a backdrop, these modern writers depict the decay of social and moral values as a reflection of Western influence. Sufferings of the poor get a prominent place in the stories of this period.

1.2.1 Women Writers

There were not as many women writers during the initial stage. The prominent names that come to mind are Sneh Devi, Nilima Sharma, Dipali Datta, Nirupama Borgohain, Prabina Saikia, Anima Datta, and Mamoni Raisom Goswami. Their writings help the reader to have an insight into the female psyche and understand the feelings and aspirations of women in the changing society. Of these writers, Sneh Devi had a restrained and conservative outlook and restricted herself to the details of family life. Nilima Sharma and Dipali Datta had a psychological angle to their writings. Nirupama Borgohain depicts the problems and conflicts that a woman faces in her family life.

Mamoni Raisom Goswami is the youngest of these writers, but stands taller in her treatment of the plots. She picks up tithbits from her vast experience and gives them life in her writings through a very sensitive and human handling.
She is fearless and honest in expressing the earthy desires of her characters, and the description of circumstances that lead them to do what they do gives her plots a truthful picture.

However, it will not be correct to think that Assamese women writers concentrate only on woman-centric plots. Preeti Barua’s short story *Swargachyuti* tells about the problems faced by refugees. Class differences in a rural society can be seen in Nirupama Borgohain’s short story *Anthropologicy Saponar Pisa*. Among the modern writers Dipali Deka, Purabi Boromodi, Arupa Patangiya Kalita, etc. write about communal disharmony and high moral values of lower-middle class families, despite their economic backwardness.

Apart from these writers, in recent times there are a host of new writers establishing themselves through the pages of weekly, bi-weekly, and monthly magazines. Since, in this section, our aim is only to give an idea about the evolution of Assamese short stories, the foregoing account should suffice.

### 1.2.2 Other Writers

In the second half of the last century most of the writers were influenced by the Marxist ideology. The Naxalite movement of the neighbouring states of West Bengal and Bihar also influenced the younger generation of writers. Poverty, oppression, injustice, etc. had a place in the writings of Udayaditya Bharali, Bipul Khataniyar, Bhupendranarayan Bhattacharyya, Rabin Borah, etc. With the help of their short stories, the writers tried to awaken the society from its slumber. Natural calamities and the sufferings of common people at the hands of nature, hypocritical life style of the middle class, fraudulence, deceitfulness, etc. drew the attention of short story writers in the nineties. Bhupen Sharma, Kamaluddin Ahmed, Debabrata Das are some writers of this period. Some other prominent writers of the new generation are Shibananda Kakati, Jyotish Sikdar, Anuradha Sarma Pujari, Kula Saikia, Khabir Ahmed and Arundhati Datta. However, the list is not exhaustive.

### 1.3 INDIRA GOSWAMI (MAMONI RAISOM GOSWAMI): AN OVERVIEW

Mamoni Raisom Goswami (Indira Goswami) is a celebrated name in the field of Assamese literature. She is ‘perhaps the greatest woman writer in Assamese today’. According to the distinguished Assamese critic, Prof Hiren Gohain, “Mamoni Raisom Goswami is the most extraordinary thing to have happened to Assamese literature in recent years”. She is the only Assamese female writer to have received the prestigious Jnanpith Award. She received this award for the year 2000 for her contribution to Assamese literature.

Born in November 14, 1942 in an orthodox family in the south Kamrup District of western Assam, Indira married Madhavan Raisom Iyenger at an early age. However, misfortune struck her very soon. She was widowed just after one year of marital bliss when her husband died in a jeep accident near Udhampur in Jammu and Kashmir in 1967. Taking life in her stride, she decided to pursue her studies from Gauhati University, Assam. She was awarded her Ph.D. degree in 1973 for her doctoral thesis on *Comparative Study of Goswami Tulsidas’ Ramcharit Manas and Madhava Kandali’s Assamese Ramayana*. At present, she is Professor in the Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies, University of Delhi.
Indira Goswami has written 25 novels and a hundred short stories in Assamese. Most of her writings have a rural background and she deals with the lives of poor and middle class people. Her writings have been very well received and many of her works have been translated into different Indian languages. Her novel *Donta Hair Une Khowa Hawda* (The Worm-eaten Hawda of a Tusker) has also been translated into Urdu in Pakistan. Indira Goswami is also a renowned scholar.

In their literary criticism of her works different critics have paid rich tributes to Goswami. For her ‘writing is like worship’. In her interview to the Times of India, after receiving the Sahitya Akademi award, she said, “Writing is in my blood, in my veins. If I stop writing I will die of suffocation. Without my pen I will die... With my writings I am free as bird, to fly anywhere, to be anyone, to understand anything.”. One of her critics Prof. Hiren Gohain’s comments are worth repeating here. “Mamoni Raisom Goswami is the most extraordinary thing to have happened to Assamese literature in recent years. She has sprung upon her readers a whole new world of experience — feelings, perceptions, thoughts, characters, types and situations — that amaze and enthral... A singular intensity of feeling and a searching honesty, courage, and masterful confidence of expression mark her writing.”.

Although acclaimed as a prominent woman novelist of the day, Mamoni Goswami emerged in the literary world as a short story writer. In most of her writings she has a female protagonist, and she portrays her sufferings, feelings, desires, both base and lofty, etc. very boldly with vivid descriptions. She has a masterly command over the language she writes in and that makes the description of the situations of her stories very life-like. Although she writes in Assamese language, her stories have a universal appeal and of her universal appeal makes them translatable.

### 1.3.1 Works of Goswami

**Novels:**

1) *Chenabar Sont* (1972) [*The Stream of Chenab*]. This book set her trend as a novelist with a new setting and some unusual characters. The background is a construction site for a bridge over the river
2) Nilakanthi Braja (1972) [Blue-necked Braja]. The background is Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh and the plot revolves around the plight, the exploitation, and the miserable lives of the Brahmin widows who come to the holy city in search of salvation.

3) Mamare Dharar Tarowal (1980) [The Rusted Sword]. Dr Goswami has received the Sahitya Akademi award for this book. This novel is also about a construction site of an aqueduct on the river Sai in Uttar Pradesh. The plot is concerned with the exploitation of the workers of the company, their labour union, and labour strike which ultimately fails because of some corrupt union leaders and manipulation by company management.

4) Dotal Hatir Une Khowa Hawda (1988) [The Worm-eaten Hawda of a Tusker]. This is a powerful novel and it won the Assom Sahitya Sabha award. Sahitya Akademi and National Book Trust of India have listed this novel as a masterpiece of Indian literature (Masterpiece of Indian Literature, Vol. I). The setting is a Vaishnavite monastic institute in the south Kamrup district of Assam. The plot revolves around the lives of three Brahmin widows in the family of the head of the monastery. The theme is the socio-economic decadence of the feudal institute lingering on till the coming of independence of India and the repression of widows in the orthodox Brahmin society. An Assamese feature film (Adahya) based on this novel won several national and international awards.

5) Tez aru Dhalire Dhusarita Prishta (1995) [Pages Stained with Blood]. This novel is based on the political violence and social unrest in Delhi in the communal riots that broke out in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi’s assassination. It is in the form of a diary of a woman protagonist living alone in Delhi and recording her first-hand experiences during the riots in 1984.

6) Adhalekha Dastabez (1988) [Unfinished Autobiography]. This is an autobiographical novel.

7) Chhinamastar Manuhto Man (2000). The background of this novel is the famous Kamakhya shrine in Guwahati, Assam. Dr Goswami faced a lot of criticism for her open criticism of the Tantric practices that prevail in Kamakhya in this book.

Apart from these highly acclaimed novels, she has written and published a host of other novels.

Short Stories:

i. Chinaki Maram (Collection of short stories) — 1962
ii. Kaina (collection of short stories) — 1966
iii. Hriday ek Nadir Nam (Collection of short stories) — 1990
v. Priya Galpa (Collection of short stories) 1999
vi. Shadow of Kamakhya, Rupa & Co., 2002

Besides these she has also translated a number of literary works into English.
Translated Works of Goswami


iii. Kalam (Collection of Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and Bengali short stories Co-translated with Papori Goswami), Student Stores, Guwahati.


vi. Ahnik (Translation of award-winning collection of Oriya poems by J.P. Das), Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.

Most of Goswami’s works have been translated into Hindi and English. A sound scholar, she has written a good number of research articles on literature, art and culture, which have been published in a number of magazines throughout the country.

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Awards received by Goswami

i. Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 at Delhi.

ii. Assam Sahitya Sabha Award in 1988.

iii. Bharat Nirman Award in 1989 at Delhi.

iv. Sauhardya Award of Uttar Pradesh Hindi Samsthan in 1992 at Lucknow.

v. Katha Award for literature in 1993 at Delhi.


vii. International Jury’s Award for the film ‘Adahya’ based on her novel Une Khowa Hawda. The film was directed by Dr Santvana Bordoloi in 1997.

viii. The International Tulsi Award in 1999 at Florida, USA, in the occasion of International Conference on ‘Tulsi Das and his works’.

ix. Jnanpeeth Award for the year 2000.

x. Padmashree (2002). She rejected this award with honour due to some personal reasons.

xi. Conferred D.Litt degree from Rabindra Bharati University, West Bengal in 2002.

xii. Mahiyashi Jaymati Award with a citation on gold by the Ahom community of Assam in 2002.

Several institutions and organisations throughout India have honoured Dr. Goswami with citations for her outstanding literary work. She had been conferred honorary membership in a number of academic and cultural organizations.
1.4.1 Introducing the Story

The *Empty Chest* is based on a true story of a coffin found in a cremation ground. The sight of the coffin made the writer brood and she created a life-like personal story of Toradoi, the protagonist. The story was first published in an Assamese magazine in the nineties.

The protagonist Toradoi lives in a shack near a cremation ground. One day she finds a bloodstained empty chest lying on the ground. On coming to know that it had carried the dead body of her lover Saru Bopa, she retrieves it and takes it to her shack. Saru Bopa was the son of a zamindar in whose house Toradoi had worked, and had died in an accident. Saru Bopa and Toradoi were in love with each other and he had vowed that he would marry her. But he did not marry her and they get separated.

She decorates herself in whatever meagre way she can and sleeps inside the empty chest in order to relive her moments of love with her lover until the reality dawns upon her. She comes to know through her policeman brother that Saru Bopa was not faithful to her as she had thought he was and had planned to marry someone else. As a proof of this he shows her the invitation cards that had been printed for the occasion. When this reality breaks upon her, she is stunned. But she recovers in a few days and with the help of her two children she drags the empty chest outside and burns it down.

Her husband is in jail for rash driving and in her absence a firewood vendor Haijol has been pestering her to sleep with him, promising to look after her two children. Earlier she would find invariably him standing outside her door fruitlessly waiting for her. But when after the death of love for Saru Bopa, she comes out of her shack ready to do anything, there is no Haijol waiting for her.

1.4.2 Critical Appreciation

The *Empty Chest* portrays the death of the protagonist's love for the zamindar's son. Toradoi works in the zamindar's house as a maid and she falls in love with his son. Her love for Saru Bopa is intense and passionate and she had given herself to him completely. But there was family opposition to the marriage. We are not given full details of the quarrel or what happened thereafter. We are only told that following the quarrel, Saru Bopa was transferred to Upper Assam. All that happened some twelve years back. We are left to assume that she had married a driver who is now in jail for rash driving. Saru Bopa's dead body is brought to the very crematorium on the fringe of which Toradoi now lives along with her two children.

The point of the story is that even after separation from him and her own marriage, her love for Saru Bopa has known no abatement. In fact her love for him has been a source of strength for her through all these years of adversity and has helped her to hold her own and survive. She is living with her children in abject poverty and they are half-starved. However, faithful to him, she can rebuke the lusty advances of Haijol, the firewood vendor, who promises a world of comfort. Her annoyance at the advances of Haijol can be
felt in her own words when she says, "What is left in this body to keep drawing you here?" (78). The writer has very effectively contrasted the lust of Haibor with the passionate and intense love of Toradoi for her lover. He would save the children from starvation. But she is loyal to Saru Bopa. The intensity of her attachment is also clear from the way she tries to relive the intimate moments of love that she had spent with her lover in his home by sleeping in the empty chest. Her love reaches to the level of frenzy.

"Its [the empty chest's] very existence gave strength to Toradoi. She ran her hands over the chest, caressing it. The bakul flowers, beautifully engraved on its sides, seemed real. She pressed her cheek to the flowers. Then, as on other days, she wriggled into the huge chest and lay there,..."

We need to remember that she had put on her wedding blouse and had felt she was spending the night on the same bed with 'he adored one'. In other words in spite of her marriage and two children Toradoi feels married to Saru Bopa. Note that her love and union with him seem real to her. It is as if she has achieved a kind of fulfillment in her love.

The disillusionment comes when her brother shatters her make-believe world with the painful truth — that Saru Bopa was ready to marry someone's else and gives her proof of this in the form of wedding cards. This encounter between Toradoi and her policeman brother Someswar is the principal focus and also the turning point in the story. Goswami's description of the moment is gripping:

"Toradoi remained rooted to the spot near the pile of wedding cards. She reached out for the cards like someone groping for the bones of the dead among the ashes of the crematorium (84).

"Toradoi's personality undergoes a sea-change after she realizes that she has spent all these years under the false belief that Saru Bopa's love for her was real and that he had stayed a bachelor only because he couldn't marry her. In other words her love for the zamindar's son has remained unrequited.

When the truth dawns on her, she is rendered speechless. She is a shattered soul at the end of the story. But she recovers and realizes that life has to go on:

"The bulbul on the hijol tree started chirping noisily. The sun rose above the Brahmaputra (84).

"Toradoi came out of her shack. She wore no chadar (85).

Toradoi's life is no longer in a twilight zone. The sun has risen in her life to a new morning. She comes out of her shack to face a new life with new challenges. Her personal misery now takes a back seat. She is least bothered about her personal appearance. She wears no chadar now—chadar being a symbol of respectability. Which means that she is ready to do anything to survive, even take to prostitution. The crowning irony is that Haibor who earlier used to stand waiting for her is not there at his usual place. Her situation is truly desperate but her will to survive seems indefatigable.

1.4.3 Narrative Technique

One of the important elements to be noted while discussing narratives is the difference between the person who speaks and the person who sees. They may be the same person, though they need not be. Here the speaker is an
omniscient third person narrator. He is not a character in the story and stands outside the action of the story. We see things through his/her eyes. That is, he/she is the focalizer. He has the godlike capacity to look into the minds of all characters and knows what is happening in them. He could be called the narrator-focalizer.

However, though he stands outside the action of the story, he sees things from the point of Toradoi who is a very intense character. This is the source of the intensity that one finds in the story. Look at the following example:

‘As she came out of her shack, Toradoi saw Haibor, the firewood vendor from the crematory, standing under the hijol tree. Again! His spindly legs stuck out from beneath his black shorts. His white teeth gleamed like the chewed up remains of sugarcane sticks’.

The third person narrator-focalizer is describing the scene outside Toradoi’s shack in the morning: Toradoi is the character focalized here. But she is also the focalizer so far as Haibor is concerned. We see Toradoi viewing Haibor. The description of Haibor’s ‘spindly legs’ and the image of his white teeth resembling ‘the chewed-up remains of sugarcane sticks’ suggest the extent of her dislike of Haibor and that he is of no use to her.

As we said earlier, Toradoi is an intense character but the external narrator-focalizer is no less intense. Note the following description:

‘The bulbulons on the hijol tree started chirping noisily. The sun rose above the Brahmaputra. Wreaths of violet and brown clouds clung to it, making it look like the pinched and pale face of a hapless prostitute, blushing at the thought of having to spend time with an unwanted stranger. The clouds seemed to lay bare the strange combination of helplessness and indomitable strength on this face’.

Here we have the narrator describing the scene after the death of love in Toradoi’s life. The comparison suggested here is quite complex but the image of clouds looking like ‘the pinched and pale face of a hapless prostitute blushing at the thought of having to spend time with an unwanted stranger’ vocalizes the feelings of Toradoi after her faith in the love of Saru Bopa proves illusory — ‘her helplessness and her indomitable strength’. The comparison conveys a great deal about Toradoi’s changed attitude in life.

**Exercises**

1. How is Someswar presented in the story? Do we know him through the narrator’s eyes or through Toradoi’s eyes or through the eyes of both?

2. To what use is the flashback technique put in the story?

**1.4.4 Style and Symbolism**

**Style**

The writer writes in a very intense and cryptic style.

Her language is very expressive of the situation depicted. Her similes are very vivid and unconventional and say a great deal.
This is how Haibor the firewood vendor in the crematorium is described:

"His spindly legs stuck out from beneath his black shorts. His white teeth gleamed like the chewed up remains of sugarcane sticks."

The comparison saves the writer from having to explain her dislike of Haibor. Again, the poverty-stricken, malnourished condition of Toradoi’s children is portrayed vividly in the following expression—Their trousers hung loose like the hides of goats strung up in a butcher’s shop (79). Note the image of violence in the above description. Such violent images are common in her stories.

Another example of eloquent images is the following:

The sun rose over the Brahmaputra. Wreaths of violet and brown clouds clung to it, making it look like the pinched and pale face of a hapless prostitute, blushing at the thought of having to spend time with an unwanted stranger (84).

The suggestion is clear that Toradoi is not averse to the life of a prostitute anymore. But the irony is, her unwanted suitor is not around anymore.

**Symbolism**

Many a times, to convey an idea or a concept in a more effective way, the writer uses symbols in writings. A single symbol may convey a great deal. A short story writer has the limitation of working on a small canvas. She does not have the luxury of a novelist to narrate his story at length. Therefore, symbols can play an important role in short story writing.

Goswami has made extensive use of symbols in her story. There is an immense variety in her symbols — some are private, and some are general. The inner psyche of the characters in her story has been effectively expressed through very powerful symbols drawn from various sources. The juxtaposition of the symbols of life and death in the form of a cremation ground and chattering of bulbuls right at the opening lines of the story is striking. Again, the Brahmaputra is a symbol of life. It is a traditional symbol of Assamese culture and society. It is intertwined with the Assamese society. Assam without Brahmaputra would, probably, have been a static society. Then we have the powerful symbol of the hijol tree in the story. It receives a special mention by the author not only at the beginning of the story, but at the end as well. It appears, as if this particular symbol drawn from nature is deliberately used to show the strength of Toradoi’s character against all odds. Hijol is a strong tree which stands erect withstanding nature’s ravages and symbolizes the unbending nature of Toradoi. Placed in front of Toradoi’s shack, it may also be considered a witness to the travails of Toradoi’s life.

The central symbol of the story is the empty chest. The empty chest is primarily a symbol of death and is used to carry the dead. But though it has been put to use to carry Saru Bopa’s body, it has also been used as a symbol of Toradoi’s love — a symbol of matrimonial consummation, a symbol of fulfillment, a symbol of belongingness, a symbol of conjugal bliss. It is also a symbol of a life after death of love, which was very real to Toradoi: She ran her hands over the chest, caressing it. (79). Vermilion and flowers, which
The big black chest lay with its mouth yawning open like the cavernous mouth of hell.

The chest assumes the character of a monster that has its mouth open to devour things — in this case it devours Toradoi’s love.

1.4.5 Characterization

There are only three main characters in the story — the protagonist Toradoi, her brother Someswar the policeman, and Haibor the firewood vendor. However, Haibor remains in the background most of the time. References to other characters like Toradoi’s two sons are meant to give a touch of reality to the story. Nevertheless, a very important character, even in its absence, is that of Saru Bopa, love for whom was the focal point in Toradoi’s life. Although circumstances made her marry a man she did not love and bear his children, she remains honest in her heart for Saru Bopa. Even during her days of hardship she prefers hunger to the advances of Haibor. She feels loyal even to the wooden chest that carried the dead body of Saru Bopa. Snuggling into the chest she goes ten years back when she was with Saru Bopa. She is so loyal to her first love that the knowledge of his death almost unsettles her. She is not bothered about the inquisitive eyes that peer into her shack, and decorating herself like a bride in whatever meager way she can, sleeps inside the chest stained with blood. The feeling is sublime for her. Yet, at the knowledge of Saru Bopa’s imminent wedding, she crumples down like a pack of cards. The memory of her young love gave her character strength, but she feels betrayed now.

Toradoi’s character stands out in the story. In Toradoi, the author has created a very emotional and passionate woman who lives for love. The beauty of her character lies in living a life of purity and love against all odds. She prefers to live a life of poverty rather than accepting the lusty suggestions of Haibor. He is not there when Toradoi really needed some support. Haibor is presented as a lustful man who tries to prey upon Toradoi.

Someswar is a tough policeman with a morally conservative outlook. Yet, he is concerned about his younger sister. ‘Sturdily built’, with ‘an imposing moustache’ wearing ‘a pair of huge ungainly boots’ and carrying ‘a sizeable stick’, he is the perfect picture of an ordinary policeman. But, within that sturdy body, he has a soft heart. A strict policeman for law-breakers, he cannot bear to see his sister suffer emotionally. He has to bring her down to reality.

Haibor is a man of lust waiting like a hawk to take advantage of the loneliness and poverty of Toradoi. With white teeth gleamed like the chewed-up remains of sugarcane sticks (78) he would wait outside Toradoi’s shack and try to cajole her into sleeping with him in her husband’s absence. But when she is awakened from her imaginary world of love, the man is not there to comfort her.
Saru Bopa is a weak lover belonging to a zamindar family. He did not think much of taking advantage of the young girl who was working as a maid in his father's house and taking care of the ailing old man. He did not have the strength of character to stand against the society and marry the poor girl who had believed his promises of love to be gospel truth.

1.4.6 Atmosphere

Goswami's short stories are known to show an obsession with death. As Prof. Namvar Singh says "Mention of Death and Gmetries are frequent in her stories" (Indira Goswami and her fictional world: p.66). This at least seems true for The Empty Chest. The writer has set her story in a cremation ground and all the action in it takes place there. Consequently the atmosphere of the story is somber. However it is not altogether dark. It is enlivened by love and also lust. The first paragraph prepares us for the peculiar atmosphere of the story.

'No one got up at this hour, not even the people who had come to live on the fringes of the cremation ground. A few bulbuls chattered in the hijol tree in front of Toradoi's shack...The stench of burnt human flesh stole across the cremation ground to mingle with the sweet scent of distant lemon blossom.'

This togetherness of death and life or its variations, death and love, or death and desire give it a strange atmosphere. The extract also shows the constant presence of nature as a backdrop.

We are told how the poor people living there carry the belongings of the dead that lie scattered on the cremation ground into their shacks and shanties. The most important article in the story is an empty chest that had been used to ferry the dead body of the lover of the protagonist, Toradoi. What makes the atmosphere truly weird is that she not only drags it inside her shack but also wears her wedding blouse and wriggles into it to relive the moments of love with her lover. And this she does for several days — till she learns the truth about the man.

The atmosphere of death that surrounds the story lends urgency to Toradoi's desperate efforts to salvage some moments of love from her otherwise hard and loveless life.

Exercise

1. Look for an example to show the co-presence of death and desire in the story.

1.4.8 Title

The title is highly suggestive.

The title of the story is suggestive as well as ironic. Like the empty chest, Toradoi's life is full of emptiness. In her younger days she was lured by empty hopes. Even in her marriage she had a worthless husband. In her later days also whatever hope she had faded away in the vast emptiness of misfortune.

To Toradoi, before her disillusionment, it was a precious object that she had salvaged from the ruins of her love. It meant a reminder of her love for Saru
Bopa. Afterwards it is really empty — empty not only in a physical sense but also emotionally because it is empty of love. And she burns it and with it all her empty hopes.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

One of the driving forces of life is 'hope'. It may be for a better tomorrow, for the fulfillment of desire unspoken or even a subconscious urge to achieve what is probably consciously unachievable. Toradoi lived with hope that some day Saru Bopa would come to take her out of her miseries and marry her. But when Saru Bopa died in an accident she derived solace by sleeping in the wooden chest in which the mutilated body of Saru Bopa had rested till his mortal remains were consigned to flames. In this way she could recall his love and caress. In her conscious mind she knew it was but a mere feeling of comfort. Yet, that comfort was enough to reaffirm her love for Saru Bopa. This also made her spurn the offer of Haibor for physical and material relief.

Toradoi loved Saru Bopa honestly. It was a pure unfulfilled love. She had accepted the fact that Saru bopa was beyond her physical reach. The very thought that he remained unmarried for a long ten years was a huge satisfaction for her. She thought that he at least reciprocated her love. In his death she wished to live with her memories of the dear one. But her dreams were shattered. In reality, Saru Bopa’s remaining unmarried had nothing to do with Toradoi’s love for him. When her brother brought this cruel fact to her by showing her the wedding invitation letters, the last ray of comfort was lost for Toradoi. After that nothing mattered to her. She was ready even for Haibor who she had strongly detested earlier. She decided to face life on its own terms. But ironically, Haibor was no more waiting there for her under the hijol tree.

Like many other stories of the writer this story too deals with the theme of love but it is love that remains unfulfilled. This thwarted passion finds expression in a most unusual way. Even in defeat the woman shows an unbreakable spirit.

1.6 GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hijol:</th>
<th>It is an indigenous tree. Its wood is used for making furniture.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Garubok:</td>
<td>Crane. A long legged, yellow-billed white bird.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uriam:</td>
<td>A kind of timber tree (<em>Bescoffa Javanica</em>).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bakul:</td>
<td>A fruit-bearing tree. The tree has small white fragrant flowers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satgaon:</td>
<td>Name of a place.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
lathi: A long, big stick.
sal: A kind of hard wood tree (*Shorea Robusta*).
gamochā: Assamese hand-woven towel.
Yama: God of Death in Indian mythology.
chadar: A long sheet — a part of dress worn by Assamese women around the upper body.

1.7 QUESTIONS

1. The title of the story is a ‘symbol’. Discuss
2. Describe the characterization of the protagonist in the story.
3. Discuss the symbols used in the story.
4. Comment on the style in the story.

1.8 SUGGESTED READINGS


II. Anthologies and Journals where short stories of Indira Goswami are included

Indian Love Stories, ed. Sudhir Kakkar, lotus collection, Roli Books, Delhi, 1999.

Imaging the others, ed. Sara Rai, Published by Katha, May 1999.


Separate Journeys (short stories by Indian writers), Published by Mantra Publishing, Great Britain, 1993.


Samakalin Bharatiya Sahitya, Sahitya akademi, New Delhi, July 2000.

Indian Literature (women writers' special issue), Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.
