

**The Utopia of Subtle Feminism in Indira Goswami's  
*The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar***

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**Abstract**

Indira Goswami was more than just a strong feminist voice. She was a humanist in the true sense of the term. Through her writings, she shed light upon the regressive elements of the society and how both men and women get trapped in them, in different ways. Her last novel *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* is a semi-fictionalized historical biography, with generous dollops of feminist stuffing in it. However, the biggest strength of the book is that it doesn't force its ideology onto the readers; just like its female protagonist who has a mind of her own and exercises her own will, even though she is most often than not surrounded a bevy of men waiting to carry out her orders. The peaceful co-existence of men and women in the book without interfering each other's physical and mental space seems a bit far-fetched from reality but the book succeeds in successfully sowing the seeds of a gender-egalitarian society. Unlike the other works of Indira Goswami where the women are the victims of societal prejudices and the educated men act as their saviours, *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* stands out as a breath of fresh air by the virtue of a female protagonist who doesn't entertain the idea of victimhood.

**Keywords:** Indira Goswami, Feminism, Thengphakhri, Tehsildar, British India, Sahibs.

**Introduction**

*The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* is a book written by Jnanpith Award winner Indira Goswami that brings into focus, the never before put to words, history of an Indian Bodo women who was the first women tax collector of British India and arguably one of the first working women of the country. In telling a personal story of an extraordinary woman who towards the end of the novel voluntarily joins the Indian freedom movement, the author

consciously transcends narrative restrictions to make it also the story of a place (Bijni Kingdom, Assam), which has been criminally underrepresented in Indian history, and its people. Goswami successfully balances history, fiction and elements of feminism in her last novel *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar*. The book was originally written in Assamese but thanks to the efforts of Aruni Kashyap, a renowned English writer and translator, it can now be enjoyed by readers around the world.

### **Feminism and Utopia**

In the preface to the book *Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative*, Sarah Webster Goodwin and Libby Falk Jones suggest that, “One women’s utopia is another’s nightmare; feminism itself takes on a range of meanings” (Preface IX). Goodwin further elucidates the point in a chapter called *Knowing Better* and states that, “...and because any definition of feminism must include an impulse to improve the human community, feminism seems to have at least an inherent utopian inclination”. (Goodwin 1). In the book, Thengphakhri’s emotional, physical and financial independence, despite her being a widow, is not only a personal achievement but also have large scale effect in improving the condition of womenfolk in general, at least in her own village, if not in all parts of India.

### **Can Feminism Be Subtle?**

Traditionally, Feminism began with the idea of women asserting their rights and demanding equality in all spheres of life, especially in the workspace. So, as a movement it always had to be loud and demonstrative, literally speaking, in order to be heard and acknowledged. In such a scenario, the idea of a subtle feminist movement seems a bit far-fetched and almost utopian. This is wherein the book *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* steps in. It achieves the rare, if not never before achieved, feat of telling a feminist story via a female protagonist who is not very vocal about her emotions. She resorts to action to make her point and successfully does so. There are many instances in the book where the female protagonist drives home the message of keeping it short, simple and direct, as far as verbal communication is concerned.

### **Methodology**

In the introduction section, the translator Aruni Kashyap, while describing Thengphakhri’s valour, however, does not lose sight of her feminine grace. Kashyap aptly describes her as a, “woman working with the British officer’s shoulder to shoulder, as a tax collector who rode a horse, wore a hat and had knee-length black hair.” (Kashyap VII). His words are just a precursor to a book that is full of such gynocentric descriptions in a world surrounded by self-assured men who encourages women to realize their full potential. The book which is written by a woman (Indira Goswami) and translated into English by a man (Aruni

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Kashyap) is itself a sign of gender compatibility and thus acts a breeding ground for ‘subtle feminism’.

### **Review of Literature**

Deachen Angmo in her analysis of the book for FeminismIndia.com focused on the “powerful and transformative silence” of Thengphakhri, along with other significant observations. She also credits the book of “re-narrativizing India’s freedom struggle by keeping Bodo life and its culture at the forefront of literary and cultural discourse” (Angmo; Feminismindia.com). Telling Thengphakhri’s story is a double-edged sword – it is both a feminist tale and a fictionalized biography - due to lack of recorded and archived materials. Indira Goswami consciously created a female character, who is passive-aggressive and has a mind of her own, but it is her creation and it would be futile to look for historical accuracy as far as her characterization is concerned.

### **Reading between the Lines**

“Why doesn’t Thengphakhri speak?” (2). Very early on in the novel, it is established that the female protagonist speaks through her actions rather than words. She is a woman of outstanding physical beauty with hair that “glittered like gold” (2). Her long hair suggests that she didn’t modify her womanly features to fit into the world of men, as opposed to the demands of her job as a tax collector. On certain occasions, her thick crop of hair came to her rescue, given her line of work as a tax collector. In one specific occasion when she was learning to ride a horse, she fell and Hardy Sahib, her mentor, “held her hair and pulled her up”. In her exact words, “he had used her thick crop of hair like a rope” (6). This incident in particular highlights the fact that her physicality is not a hindrance of any kind in fulfilling her duties.

The three most important person in her life – her grandfather Tribhubon Bahadur, her mentors Macklinson Sahib and Hardy Sahib – are all men. Thengphakhri has an emotional attachment with each one of them. They are not only her guides on a personal and professional level but also pillars for her to rest on while navigating through her young life as a professional and as a widow in charge of her life. In their very first meeting Macklinson Sahib advised Thengphakhri that, “You won’t be able to become a good administrator if you are soft. If you don’t have a strong personality, there is no value in your beauty” (3). Fortunately, Thengphakhri is sensitive but not weak, and possess a strong personality to complement her beauty; so much so that impressed by her demenaour Macklinson Sahib once called her “great”. As far as Hardy Sahib is concerned he not only gifted Thengphakhri her first horse but also taught her to ride it and how to handle a gun; the two indispensable qualifications for her to carry out her job as a tax collector.

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There is a recurrent mention of ‘guava wood’ in the novel. As per spiritual beliefs, guava represents “quite yearning” and understanding. Seeing guava in a dream means feeling good about oneself, vicariously through the feelings of others. Thengphakhri’s emotional attachment with Hardy Sahib is expressed in very few words in the novel but if the reader reads between the lines then there is an obvious allusion to an exchange of feelings between them that transcends professional boundaries. In fact, there is no inhibition from her side as there is no attempt to hide her feelings and longing for Hardy sahib. When she was informed of Hardy’s death by Macklinson Sahib, she was heartbroken, to say the least.

Thengphakhri fearlessly goes on about her duty as in the back of her mind she is aware of the fact that people of her village “have great respect for women” (3). And she herself is living proof of that. Despite being a widow, she didn’t face any objection from her family and fellow villagers when she decided to venture out of the comforts of her home and work; that too alongside British officers. This is very much unlike the other female protagonists of Indira Goswami’s novels who are forced to undergo physical and mental transformations trapped inside the four walls of their homes. But Thengphakhri by the virtue of her work gets to experience the real world which heightens her mental faculty and helps her make the correct decisions in times of emergency.

Her uncle Musahari has a very interesting analogy to describe British Memsahibs. In his own words, “the people from the North say they are born from eggs laid in trees. The sahibs hold on to their waists so that they don’t fly off into the skies.” (9). According to him, Thengphakhri is the complete opposite of them and calls her “a brave Bodo woman” (9) of whom even the horses are scared of. This analogy by the author is a means to show the difference between Indian women and British Memsahibs as far as a privileged position in society is concerned. The Memsahibs command respect simply by the virtue of being the wives of British officers. On the other hand, women like Thengphakhri and her ilk have to earn respect through hard work. The ‘bronze sword’ in the title not only emphasizes her bravery but also highlights the fact that she is a natural born fighter. And the beauty of her bravery lies in the fact that it is her grandfather, a patriarch, who taught her how to wield a sword before she was recruited by Captain Hardy, initially as an Izardar and later promoted to the position of Tehsildar. She changed the course of history by becoming the first women in India to be in a position to collect taxes, a job that demands a very masculine demeanour. Throughout the course of the narrative, she hardly loses her cool and uses her silence as a tool of unpredictability and as a curtain to her thought process. Only her grandfather understands her myriad moods and whims. Also, Thengphakhri is not someone who takes compliments seriously. Owing to her observant nature she is fully aware of the pros and cons of her position and whenever she speaks, she speaks her mind.

Apart from her physical strength, a lot has been mentioned about her physical beauty in the text. Elizabeth, Captain Hardy's wife, repeatedly waxes lyrical about her natural beauty and thus attributes to her a rare quality of feminine grace and physical courage. Thengphakhri's hair, in particular, enticed Elizabeth Memsahib. On their first encounter, Elizabeth kept touching her hair, "to test if it was real" (12).

Regarding her choice of career as a tax collector, there is hardly any objection from her fellow villagers, be it men or women. As mentioned earlier, the men act as mentors and guide to her, while the women adore her beauty and grit. Her story of self-sufficiency in fending for herself as well as taking care of her family is not only ahead of its time but also one of a kind. The author Indira Goswami by the way of her book very carefully provides for its female protagonist an environment to bloom and where she can make decisions without cowering to the pressures of society, patriarchy and peers. *The Bronze Sword of Thengphakhri Tehsildar* challenges the very core of a pre-Independent Indian society where women were not considered equal to men as far as emotional and financial liberty was concerned. In her book, Goswami presents an almost Utopian kind of an Indian society where men support their female counterparts in their pursuit and in Thengphakhri's case she is supported by her grandfather, uncle, fellow male villagers and most importantly the British officers, who go out of their way to make her feel comfortable. Supporting her decision to become a tax collector, an elderly person from her village stated, "when young widows are burnt alive with their husbands by force... in such times, our Thengphakhri will be collecting taxes! Will be working and earning for her family! Bah! This is amazing, we should be proud of her!" (18).

Also, Thengphakhri's strength lies not in her aggressive feminism; a concept which didn't exist in her times, but in her assertion of her rights in straightforward words and at times even through her silence and stern gaze. She rides a horse, wields guns and swords and literally matches steps with her male counterparts in every aspect of her life.

Once Ram Babu, a soldier hailing from Uttar Pradesh, visited her village and impressed by her personal and professional exploits commented, "She has the Mother's blessings! Here women are respected and look at us: our women are hidden behind the purdah. They can't even leave their hair open like this, they can't wear hats like this..." (27). His words highlight the fact that there is a clear distinction regarding the status of women in different parts of India and the story of Thengphakhri is nothing short of a culture shock to him. This is where her story makes an impact. Telling her story not only put the spotlight on a woman who almost got lost in the passage of time but also looks into the possibility of a world where gender equality is the norm rather than an exception.

Towards the end, when she could no longer ignore the nationalistic feelings taking shape within her, she doesn't resort to chest thumping and jingoistic rhetoric. Staying true to her introvert self, she informs her grandfather about her decision to serve her motherland in very few words as possible and he in return blesses her and reminds her, "You mustn't forget to take your bronze sword with you. You will win." (122). Here the bronze sword becomes synonymous with her courageous soul. Even as the written words begin to cease, we get a feeling that she succeeds in her new mission too. Such is the power of her subtle conviction.

## Conclusion

Reading the book gives you a lot to ponder upon. For instance, Thengphakhri's reluctance to fit into the traditional space of a protagonist is a statement in itself. She is the master of her own life. The author makes it very clear through her words that the men around her are only allowed to guide her and the final decisions in any matter will be hers. The rural, as well as the colonial setting, helps Thengphakhri in leading an ideal life of personal joy and professional satisfaction. The near Utopian like situation in the novel should not be dismissed as convenient but should be treated as a gateway into a world of gender equality and emancipation of women, where men play the leading role.

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