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Neelakshi Chaliha Gogoi's *Dark Chocolate*: From the Perspective of Female Hormone

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Abstract: In the contemporary Assamese literature few literary works have been produced on some unconventional themes related to the field of Psychology, Physiology, Science and Medical Science etc. One of the such literary pieces is the novel *Dark Chocolate* by Neelakshi Chaliha Gogoi. The author is a physician and hence she knows very well about woman's body, different hormones and their biological roles in woman's body etc. She is driven by a strong desire to do something for those women who suffer a lot in their life due to lack of body literacy or hormonal intelligence. As a result of her enthusiasm in this field, she has penned down the novel *Dark Chocolate* based on the theme of female hormone. Apart from the prominent theme of female hormone, the novel also contains the theme of sufferings of women, the physical state of women in patriarchal society, issues of equalities and aspirations of women, traditional beliefs, rituals etc. of our society very realistically by depicting the tragic saga of the central character, Madhu.

Key Words: Body literacy, Dark Chocolate, Equality, Female hormone, Hormonal intelligence.

0.1 Introduction: Hormones play vital role in human body. The physical and mental wellbeing of human beings depend upon the hormones. Human bodies can produce hormones naturally as a part of its biological process. In addition, 'bio-identical' hormones are also present in human bodies, which can be used to supplement or replace our own naturally occurring hormones as they decline over time. "Hormones are finally getting the attention they deserve. They are of great importance to our health and well-being. They provide the background music to all women's lives."¹ The moods, emotions, likes and dislikes, anxiety, sadness, depression, happiness etc. of human beings are greatly influenced by these chemical messengers of human body which are produced by endocrine system. The study of hormone has always been an important topic. But in recent years, it has very remarkably focused and expanded than the past years. "It's about time we educated ourselves on the effects of our hormones and their relationship to our body and our brain chemistry so we can embrace these 'sparks' of life. It's about time we listened to these chemical messengers and understood what they are saying."² Based on the theme of hormone till now only a few numbers of literary works have been produced. Some notable literary works based on such themes are, *The Bell Jar*, *The Red Tent*, *The Handmaid's Tale* etc. *The Bell Jar* (1963) is one of the most popular novels of Sylvia Plath, where the novelist explores the themes of female hormones and how the lives of women influenced by those hormones. It also presents women's mental health and feelings to the menstrual cycle. American novelist Anita Diamont's novel *The Red Tent* (1997) also explores the theme of female hormone and the impact of those hormones on women. The novelist treats menstruation as a religious and social event. Margaret Atwood in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) describes a fictional society where women's have only one role and that is reproduction. Assamese novel *Dark Chocolate* is also such a novel, where the novelist presents the theme of female hormones and their impact on the lives of women by portraying the character of Madhu. The present paper will study this novel from this point of view.

0.2 Objectives of the Study: The primary objective of this research paper is to focus the physical and mental situation of women in a patriarchal society. This study will highlight women's sufferings, their sexual behavior, sexual harassments etc. in our society. It also aims to study woman's body illiteracy or hormonal intelligence from a biological point of view.

0.3 Methodology: The descriptive and analytical methods have been adopted for this research paper.

0.4 Data Collection: To prepare this paper primary data are collected from the novel *Dark Chocolate* and secondary data are collected from different books on female hormones and websites etc.

0.5 Scope of the Study: The scope of the study of Neelakshi Chaliha Gogoi's novel *Dark Chocolate* is very comprehensive. To discuss this novel in the limited range of a research paper is not an easy task. Therefore, for the convenience of the study, only the theme of female hormone reflected in this novel with special reference to the character of Madhu is attempted here to focus on.

1.00 Discussion: In the male- dominated society, women have always been used by men to their advantages. They are used only as sexual being and the machine of human reproduction. It can be discerned that, a woman who is not able to satisfy the male partner, to reproduce human being, or who is not getting the menarche, has not equal right to live in the society.

Amenorrhea is a medical term that specially related to women. It simply means the condition of a woman who does not get a menstrual period. "Amenorrhea is generally defined as the absence of menstruation in a female of reproductive age. It can be classified as either primary or secondary amenorrhea. Primary amenorrhea is the failure to reach menarche (i.e. the first menstrual cycle) during normal development. It is clinically diagnosed when there is no history of menstruation by the age of 15 years or 3 years after menarche."³ The basic cause of primary amenorrhea is related to the levels of hormone. Hormone plays very crucial role in the regulation of various functions of human body. A woman's good health depends upon hormonal health. Female hormones influence every aspect of woman's life, including the mood, likes and dislikes etc of a woman. "Hormones have a profound impact on the way we feel, think and act."⁴ But all women will not be hormonal. Some may suffer from hormone deficiency also. Suffering from hormone deficiency does not mean a meaningless life. Woman suffers from hormone deficiency has the full right to make her world beautiful in her own way. Madhu, the central characters of the novel *Dark Chocolate* is such a woman. She is described as a girl who has not got the primary amenorrhea. The novelist reflects very realistically the pain, sufferings, distress, agony, anguish, hardship etc. of a woman having primary amenorrhea by the character of Madhu.

Madhu belongs to a very poor family. The financial condition of her family is so deplorable that without repairing her old cotton shirts she cannot even think to attend school. But she has treasured lot of hopes. In her own words, "Many hopes, many dreams, many desires have been saved and make mountain."⁵ (Trans.) However, she is very good in her study. She is capable to get ten out of ten marks in the class test. Madhu has reached the upper class of High School. All the girls in the group have attained the menarche one by one. Mouman, the daughter of Madhu's aunt, who lives in the same yard, has reached the menarche. Madhu has seen "an underwear which is soaked reddened and became sticky."⁶ (Trans.) She understands everything. Her aunt requests her to help Mouman. But Madhu is not strong enough mentally to assist Mouman at that moment. She is too much depressed to think that she has not attained the completeness of woman's life, what her younger sister Mouman has already got. So unable to help her sister, she thinks- "She is my little sister. I would take care of my sister's clothes, be her companion- I can't imagine it."⁷ (Trans.) She thinks about all the girls of her class who have got menarche, the suggestions that their mothers and grandmother given to them, their four days fasting, a candle of mustard oil placed near their heads during menarche, a jar of water, a small branch of mango in the water, a rice filled 'dunari' (a basket like tool made of bamboo or brass), the joking of neighbouring aunts with her menstruating friends about mentioning their newly acquired reproductive capability, tears of the mothers, dreams of mothers where they dreamed their daughters getting grooms, the ritual of taking 'japa' (a kind of suitcase made of bamboo strips) on the third day, the 'gazi' (a sprout) in 'japa' which symbolizes the child to be born, a banana plant is made groom symbolically etc. Madhu understands that these are only their traditions. These are very important exercises. Girls grow up one day and they really get married. They get engaged in their conjugal life. They get children from their men. But Madhu does not feel well to think all these. In her words- "Something I didn't like."⁸ (Trans.)

Madhu, who does not have the same physical structure like Mouman, Anjana is ridiculed and humiliated by people like Pakhila pehi, Anujda for not reaching menarche. Like the other girls she also wants to attain the menarche. "She struggles with the intense desire to wear 'mekhela'." ⁹ (Trans.) ('mekhela'- the lower garment of Assamese woman) But her dreams are dashed. The old light blue dress her mother has taken out to wear at Mouman's wedding makes her even sadder because she is not gaining menarche or menstruating like Mouman. Sadly, she goes out into the street and looks at the two storey house next to their thatched bamboo hut. That is Manjit's house. Manjit, her Jeet da is a poet, a science teacher. Madhu sometimes goes to Jeet da's house. She likes the cupboard in his room filled with books. She wants to touch and read each and every book. When Jeet says her emotionally- "Books are my first love", ¹⁰ (Trans.) Madhu asks impatiently what his last love is. Is book his last love? But Jeet tells her to find herself the answer. Madhu wants to be a book. She is jealous of every book in Jeet's cupboard. She becomes stubborn to prove her superiority and tries desperately to enter the world of books. Jeet constantly supports her by allowing her to read his books. Thus, Madhu starts to feel him like a special man for her. The two become friends and discuss various topics like ghosts in the form of human beings, about virgin cleansing, gonorrhea, syphilis, menstruation, fertility, women's intelligence, virginity test, superstitions, male dominance etc. etc. Gradually Manjit becomes attracted to Madhu and he worries about her safety. The moment he awakens the inherent love desire of a man for a woman, he realizes that Madhu is not hormonal like other women. Even she is not intelligent. At the same time Madhu cries bitterly for her weakness, for her inability, for not being able to respond Jeet with fragrance of womanhood despite her best efforts.

Madhu grows older, learns new things, but she does not grow up, since she has not attained menarche yet. She is plunged into the world of sadness. She uses to avoid everyone and focuses solely on her study. Jeet da supports her in her study regularly and thus she becomes close to Jeet da. In course of time she has passed her matriculation and enrolled in Science stream. At that time, she has rediscovered Jeet da. Now Jeet is like a dream prince with a changed appearance. He uses to write poems, articles, stories etc. Madhu searches the source of inspiration of his poetry. In some moments she feels that the inspiration of Jeet's poetry is none but she herself. She seems to be able to offer Jeet what he wants. She seems to introduce him to the true love inside her. But the next moment she gets upset. She remembers the lessons what she gets from the society- the mind and body are the life force to sustain life- this energy moves to everywhere. To hold Jeet da she must maintain her mental strength as well as her physical strength. Therefore, Madhu vows to build her woman body with her sincere will and strength and hopes that one day Jeet will return to her life.

In the course of time Madhu becomes anxious to know the things, the secrets related to women. She wants to know which chemistry qualifies woman as world conquerors, strength givers, unique, earthly etc. Madhu, Anjana, Bidisha and other girls of her class discuss about the reproductive system, the female hormones that the lady teacher feels difficult to explain in the class etc. When the teacher talks about estrogen, progesterone and the growth hormone etc. the other girls feel the presence of these hormones in their own bodies. But Madhu does not feel anything and hence she is forced to consider herself as a 'dweller in the desert. In her words- "I am a dweller of desert. I have thorns to be a cactus, but no sap! I had already read repeatedly about hormones in closed room at home. Hereditary gene defects, hypothalamus or pituitary disorders, genital abnormalities- so many reasons are here why women become barren deserts, they lose their desired spring, I was shocked sometimes to read all these." ¹¹ (Trans.)

Driven by a strong desire to be a complete woman biologically like her other friends, she almost becomes mad. Therefore, suffering in the extreme instability, she spills a bottle of red dye on her underwear to pretend getting menarche. She sees the blood of a woman in that red dye. With that blood she wants to paint a complete woman holding the world. When she wants money from Jeet to buy this red dye bottle, Jeet realizes immediately about her intention and hence denies giving her money, but he is too much hurt to see her mental agony. As a conscious youth of young generation and Madhu's well-wisher, he feels that he has lot of things to do for Madhu. Therefore, he wants to explain Madhu- "one is not born, rather becomes a woman." ¹² (Trans.) He wants to tell her that she is not just a sexual being, she is a human being. The room she is in is hers only. He wishes to explain her- the great quotation of Virginia Woolf- "A room's of one's own." Being outside the confines of ordinary men, Jeet understands that a complete mental being can be formed without physical perfection. That is possible only by studying books. He thinks- "Doesn't touch. Doesn't kiss. Confluence! That is impossible. Yet the trees give tree. It makes the earth green." ¹³ (Trans.) Jeet wants to take care of Madhu. He wishes to tell her that women can be wealthy without sex, without hormone. A little love from a man can

arouse a thrill in the heart of a woman suffering from hormones or without hormones. Therefore, after being caught by her mother pretending to have her first menstrual period, when Madhu has turned into a silent female figure and behaves abnormally, Jeet tries to cure her. And so, according to the advice of his doctor sister-in-law Sandhya, Jeet is ready to offer Madhu a dark chocolate made of cocoa to arouse special feelings in her heart. He hopes that special feelings and intimacy will create special hormones like oxytocin, dopamine, serotonin etc. in her body. These hormones can give her a sense of love, courage and confidence which will keep her save from becoming a desert dweller. Jeet wishes to convince Madhu that a woman cannot be identified by only hormonal identity. Women who are lack of hormones or suffering from hormone deficiency can have their own beautiful world like the hormonal women. They can live beautiful and perfect life with equal rights.

2.00 Findings: Certain chemical messengers in the blood called hormones affect every aspects of a woman's life. Hormonal intelligence plays a significant role in a woman's life to lead a beautiful and complete life. The most important thing to achieve hormonal intelligence is body literacy. Women like Madhu in *Dark Chocolate* cannot fully discover themselves due to their inability to acquire body literacy. They don't know what is normal and what is abnormal in their body. They are lack of knowledge about their sexual ability, or their reproductive powers. Every woman may not be hormonal. But women suffering from hormone deficiency can also enjoy all the happiness and beauty of life through penance, meditation, medicine and science based hormonal intelligence. Such women can beautify their own world in their own way with love, trust, courage, friendship etc., which they receive from dear one. In the *Dark Chocolate*, Jeet's constant efforts to reveal such a world in front of Madhu, his attempts to release hormones of happiness and love from Madhu's brain by offering her dark chocolate are worthy to be mentioned.

3.00 Conclusion: In the conclusion, it can be said that though the story of the novel unfolds the unbearable sufferings of women who are having lack of hormones or insufficient hormones, yet it ends with an optimistic tone.

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