

Forgotten and Abandoned: The Widows in Indira Goswami's The Blue-necked God and The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker

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บทคัดย่อ

บทประพันธ์ของอินทริกา โคสวามี ได้มีการนำเสนอความแข็งแกร่งของตัวละครหญิงมากมาย นำเสียดายที่ตัวละครเหล่านั้นแสดงบทบาทที่แข็งแกร่งในสภาพสังคมที่น่าสังเวช ตัวละครเอกอย่าง เสาดามินิ ในนวนิยายเรื่อง The Blue-necked God มุ่งหน้าสู่แคว้นวรินทวันเพื่อจะมีชีวิตอยู่กับศรัทธาอันแรงกล้าในศาสนาและการสวดสรรเสริญพระกฤษณะในวัด เก็บรวบรวมเงินที่ได้จากการให้ทานเล็กๆ น้อยๆ เพื่อประกอบพิธีกรรมทางศาสนา แต่สุดท้าย เสาดามินิก็ตกอยู่ในสภาพของผู้ถูกทอดทิ้ง อดอยากหิวโหย เหตุเพราะความเป็นหญิงหม้ายของตนเอง เช่นเดียวกับตัวละครอย่างทูรคา, สารู โคสโสเนและคิริบาลา ในนวนิยายเรื่อง The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker ซึ่งแสดงให้เห็นเรื่องราวแห่งความหวดร้าของหญิงหม้าย โคสอินิในวรรณะพราหมณ์ผู้ตกอยู่ภายใต้ปฏิบัติการทางสังคม บทความนี้มุ่งวิเคราะห์สภาพโซดชะตาอันเลวร้ายของตัวละครหญิงหม้าย สภาพสังคมฮินดู ตัวละครและธรรมเนียมปฏิบัติในศาสนา บทความนี้ต้องการแสดงให้เห็นสถานภาพทางสังคมอันน่าเศร้าของหญิงหม้ายในสังคมอินเดีย แม้ว่าปัจจุบัน อินเดียจะเป็นยุคที่ผู้หญิงมีสิทธิ์ต่อสู้เรียกร้องหาความยุติธรรมได้แล้วก็ตาม ผู้หญิงหม้ายในสังคมอินเดียยังคงต้องต่อสู้เพื่อสิทธิของตน ยังเป็นบุคคลชายขอบภายใต้โครงสร้างบรรทัดฐานทางสังคม วัฒนธรรม ศาสนาและวรรณะ คนเหล่านี้ถูกปฏิบัติเสมือนผู้ไร้ความสามารถในการดำเนินชีวิตในทุกๆ เรื่อง และต้องจำใจใช้ชีวิตอย่างคนชายขอบ

คำสำคัญ : วัฒนธรรม, ศาสนา, วรรณะ, การปกครองแบบพ่อปกครองลูก, ความเป็นหญิงหม้ายและการเป็นคนชายขอบ

Abstract

Indira Goswami's writings have a strong presence of women characters. Unfortunately, they are strong women in deplorable circumstances imposed by societal norms in the name of religion culture and caste. Saudamini, the protagonist of the novel, The Blue-necked God, goes to Vrindavan to live a life of piety and sing Lord Krishna's praises in the temples and collect the pittance as a saving for her last rites. But she ends up in grave deprivation, hunger and thirst due to the rigorous rituals meant for the widows. Similarly, Durga, Saru Gossainee and Giribala in The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker depict the heart-wrenching stories of the Gossain (Brahmin) widows under the veil of social practices. This paper is an attempt to highlight the plight of widows, a section of the Hindu society and the characters and their practices in their region in particular. It tries to draw attention to the pitiable conditions of widows in India even in the present era where women have the right to fight for equality. Sadly, widows in Indian society still have to struggle, marginalized by the constructed social norms in the name of culture, religion and caste. They are made incapacitate in all aspects of social life and are compelled to live in internalized prison of marginalization.

Key words: Culture, Religion, Caste, patriarchy, widowhood and Marginalization

Conceptual Background

Some of the issues discussed in the paper are based on the understanding of Concepts such as Patriarchal system, Religion, Culture, Caste System and Marginalization. According to Allan G Johnson, Patriarchal System is "organized around an obsession with control, with men elevated in the social structure because of their presume ability to exert control (whether rationally or through violence or threat of violence and women are devaluated for their lack of control), women are assumed to need men's supervision, protection or control". (Allan. G Johnson, 2005). The concept of religion and religious practices also plays a vital role in restricting the members of the society from several domains of human affairs. According to Emile Durkheim, 'Religion is defined as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things". (Durkheim, Joseph Ward Swain, 1965). Tradition and culture, a part and parcel of the society as shared knowledge also make us respond to the surroundings where we live as community. J. P Lederach in his work, *Preparing for Peace: Conflicts Transformation across Cultures* defines Culture as "shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing and responding to the social realities around them". (J.P Lederach, 1995). Belonging to a social group make us an integral part of social class division which exist in every society. According to Kroeber A.C, "Caste system is a special form of social classes which in tendency at least are present in every society. Abbey Dubois opines that "The caste system originated and developed in India because of Brahmins imposed severe social restrictions on 'non Brahmins, especially on the "Sudras" to preserve their purity". In the process of class divisions there are certain section of people who are marginalized due to disadvantages or systematically deprived and dominated by the socially powerful class in society. So marginalization is a term used to describe the

“socially disadvantage” community or groups and which is understood as exclusion in areas such as education, politics and economics. It extends to sociological and psychological level. Indira Goswami's novels - The Blue-necked God and the Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker deals with women characters who are victims of marginalization due to patriarchal confinements, cultural and religious restrictions based on rigid caste system.

Introduction

Indira Goswami, is an established writer from Assam, India. Her literary output is well marked by her prolific writing career. A recipient of several awards, she was the winner of the “Sahitya Akademi award” in 1983 for the novel The Rusted Sword, “the Bharat Nirman” award in 1989, “Hindi Sansthan of Government of India in 1992, “Komal Kumari Foundation National award”, in 1996. She was also the winner of India's highest literary award the Jnanpith award. Her writings in various genres such as the novels, short stories and poems mostly deal with social problems. Her fictional works provide an opportunity for her to vent out her frustration and anger against atrocities committed against the women in the name of religious practice and the constructed societal norms. In her works Goswami highlights the cruelties and subhuman treatment on the marginalized section of people especially the women and the widows. Amitav Ghosh, a well-known Indian author rightly states: “Indira Goswami is one of the pre-eminent literary figures in India and a woman of remarkable courage and conviction... She has also been an important voice in championing women's causes, and has done much to highlight the plight of widows.”

In her novels *The Blue-necked God*, *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, and *The Man from Chinnamasta*, there is a strong presence of women characters. But they are strong women made weak by the rigid patriarchal norms imposed on them by the society and their lives are bound by the cultural and religious practices. The women characters are always treated as the “other”¹ and are objects of men’s scorn and atrocities and society’s burden. Women are the marginalized section of people who have to wade through the many layered structures of the social ethos and religious bindings. The widows are the worst sufferers in the cauldrons of the patriarchal society where the norms of culture and tradition and religious teaching are often imposed so as to maintain their dominance over women. Indira Goswami’s writings throw light on the problems of women in general and widows in a section of the Hindus. The rigid caste system leaves no space for freedom and the widows are caged under the prism of religious practices. Goswami’s women characters buckle down under the pressures of the constructed societal norms. The paper is an attempt to highlight the problems and plight of widows in Indira Goswami’s *The Blue-necked God* and *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. Both the novels have women characters—the widows and through these characters, Goswami focuses on the evil and the dark side of the religious practices and the caste system which play a major role in the degradation of the status of Hindu widows. The caste system creates major havoc in dividing people based on their religion, rank and status in the society.

Major Themes in the Two Novels

Goswami’s *The Blue-necked God* is a sensitive and true portrayal of the plight of widows living in the holy city of Vrindavan. Semi autobiographical in nature, it depicts the unspeakable suffering and abject poverty and miseries of the widows in the land of Lord Krishna. After the death of her husband,

Saudamini is brought by her father to Vrindavan to lead a life of piety. Widows in Vrindavan are known as Radheswamys who live within the temple premises. Goswami through her characters reveals the evil practices and exploitation of the women both physically and mentally and voices for their cause. By exposing the predicament of the widows Goswami questions the very foundation of the imposed practices of widowhood. Though Saudamini is considered as a rebel and is depicted as a strong character, she is crushed down by the orthodox norms of the Hindu Brahmins.

The novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* is based in Amranga Sattra² of Assam around the time of India's Independence. History therefore intrudes in the novel to highlight the changing socio political scenario where there were uprisings against the existing feudal system. Against this backdrop the novel highlights the heart wrenching stories of three widows of the Gossain Brahmins who live under the shadows of the rigid religious rituals and social practices. They live a marginalized life deprived of freedom and human dignity. Though revolutionary changes were taking place as India was preparing for Independence; the harsh and rigid caste system became a major barrier in improving the life of the widows. Their marginalized existence make the author familiarize the reader with the myriad colored contradictions in the Indian society where gender equality, justice and emancipation of women and widows in particular are debated on. *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* deals with pathetic and deplorable condition of widows of the Gossain Brahmins and how the patriarchal society framed iron rules to cage the women in the name of the so called 'refine' ethos of religious practice and caste system.

The writer through the gripping stories of the women characters, gives us an insight as to how different traditions, sanctified and sanctioned by the society become tools for enforcing dictums against the widows in the society. Caste system and religion conspire to frame laws for the believers and act as the surveillance tool. Religious ideologies are used to propagate the concepts on practicing chastity, purity and sanctity of the high caste Brahmin women and widows. The women characters in Goswami's novel are victims of social prejudices. The novel is also autobiographical in nature as the author herself was a high caste widow who had gone through the street of Varanasi to research on the Ramayana.

The Widows in *The Blue-necked God*

The background of the novel is set in the holy city of Vrindavan, a sacred place of the Hindus. The novel gives the vivid and disturbing condition of the widows who live a life of deprivation and hunger, forsaken by the society. She throws light on the unimaginable mental suffering and exploitation of the widows who lived in utter misery and dilemmas confounded by religious dictums.

The protagonist of the novel is Saudamani, a young widow who falls in love with a Christian youth soon after her husband's death. But she is forced to leave him and she is brought to Braj (Vrindavan)³. The widows in Vrindavan are supposed to live in singing praise to lord Krishna and to earn their living with the pittance and also save enough for their funeral rituals after their death. Though in the eyes of the society they are expected to live in piety and devotion, they are exploited by the men in religious garbs. Saudamani, as she tries to familiarize herself with the new surroundings, observes the realities of the pitiable conditions of the widows which make her miserable. She realizes to her utter

dismay that the position of the widows in the land of Lord Krishna are not only pitiable sight but a place full of delusion without a hope of redemption. She observes that the widows were forced to sing the religious bhajans even if they were starving. "They had to sing the Lord's praises as loud as they could even if they were on the verge of choking" (Goswami,23). While touring around Brajdhham, Saudamini get to listen to miserable stories of the old widows which makes cringe with repulsion as one of the old womannarrates the vulnerabilities of the women folk where they were expected to be safe and secure. The cackles, "Oneday, this wicked man was observing our legs. Assoon as we knew this, we fled and saved ourselves...See, look at our legs. And they pulled their tattered clothes up to their knees and exposed their legs". (22) A rebel by nature, Saudamani tries to escape from the clutches of the sexual predators and tries to finds answers to her lonely and miserable existence when she says, "Was there ever another girl who had to face such situation? Has anyone like me ever come to this sacred land of Braj? (Bhattacharya 2013: 107). In her quest for answers Saudamani discovers the hidden and duel life of the widows who are victims of systematic oppressions. She encounters characters like Sashiprova who was kept as a helper to a priest during the day for performing rituals and made to share their room in the evenings in the name of Jugal Upasana; a form of worship in pair or couple. Thus Sashiprova becomes a victim of sexual exploitation in the name of religious ritual. In one of her conversation, when Mrinalini pose a question on Sashiprova if Alamgarhi, the priest has not harmed or spoilt her in sharing a room with him. Sashiprova replies, "One day, he asked me to disrobe completely in front of him and I did. He scrutinized my body thoroughly in the light of the lamp. Then he put out the lamp and went and slept in his own bed". Sashiprova had to constantly deal with her indefinable ambiguous status of her relationship with the priest of the temple. This

miserable existence often plagued her thought though she was given the satisfaction of a shelter in the priest's room instead of the dingy pigeon-holes where the other widows lived. Her constant fear of her indefinable status made her all the more vulnerable when she comes to know that the temple she was serving was to be sold off in a few days. She confides her fear and bleak future to Saudamini when she says,

“For a long time I have spent my days serving the temple’s Lord Damodar. Now I will have to live with Alamgari as his mistress. We have not been married, but we will have to live as husband and wife. Can you imagine anything worse than this? Some old women who can no longer sing bhajan⁴ as *radheshyamis* often live like this, hoping that the man will provide for their last rites, or out of fear. But me?! No, you will probably not understand these things”. She finds it difficult to comprehend the unpredictable future that lies before her as she could be thrown into a worst situation. In desperation she pleads in prayer, “Dear God, she pleaded silently, please don’t let anyone else be in my position. Don’t make anyone as lonely and vulnerable as I am”(65), a situation she does not wish for anyone, a helpless and hopeless existence, where religious boundaries and social norms seem to confiscate her right to a life of dignity and self-respect.

Mrinalini, is also a widow who is compelled to lead a life of deprivation and loneliness as she has to take up the responsibility of looking after her father who was mentally imbalanced and almost blind. They are abandoned by relatives and friends where the stigma of widowhood followed them wherever they went. Their windows to the world are closed by the social structures which came in the form of religious rituals. They are denied the life of dignity and self respect. In the name of providing security, widows like Shashiprava are abused

physically and tortured by sexual predators that go scot-free from hand of justice. In all these exploitation and inhuman treatment the widows are expected to die like the street dog left to their wretched fate. Thus the widows in *The Blue-necked God* are victims of man-made norms which have marginalized them to the brink of despair. Saudamani, though a strong women succumbs to the pressures of the society. She is a forsaken victim left to her fate in the land of lord Krishna where Hindu widows went to find solace and consolation.

The widows in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*

The setting of the story is in Amranga, in south Kamrup district in Assam. The theme is also woven around the socio-economic and political scenarios at the advent of India's freedom from the British rule. Goswami highlights the treatment of the women characters especially the widows of the Gossain Brahmins in the 'Satras' of Assam. There, the widows are considered as polluted, inauspicious and unlucky for the rest of womenfolk. Gossain widows are made to live within the premises with no hope of redemption. Even theunmarried young girls after attaining their puberty are prohibited from many activities including right to education. When they attain puberty they are considered to become sinful and their virtue can be saved only through marriage

The story of the novel revolves around three widows of the Gossain family-Durga, SaruGossain and Giribala. Durga is the eldest of the three and is an epitome of patience and obedience; the traditional Gossain widow who takes whatever comes to her life as a gift of fate. After the death of her husband, she never demands for her right to property. SaruGossainee the other widow is attracted to one Mahidhar, a young man, in whom she finds some compassion

and affection. But she too becomes a victim of the scheming and cunning Mahindhar who uses her soft corner for him as a weapon to exploit her and deprive her of property by fraudulent means. Shocked by such betrayal, Saru relapses into the world of hopelessness and misery. Her world comes crushing down by the ruthless behavior of the man whom she had invested her love and trust. Giribala, the youngest and the smartest among the three is depicted as a non-conformist widow who has a mind of her own and would like to have a space of her own and live life on her own terms. When her husband dies, she goes back to her parental home and helps a foreign missionary by the name Mark Sahib who worked for the poor and the needy. But when she gets the news that she has to go back to her in-laws as a part of the social norms, she shows her rebellious side. She also hated the fact that she has to remain as a widow within the four walls of the house which was under the constant scrutiny and surveillance of the society. She did not want to live like a widow where rigorous routine of restrictions in food habits and dress code had to be faithfully followed as was expected from the society. Her sense of reasoning and probing led her to look for individual freedom and disassociate herself from the subversive clause of the Brahmin society where widows did not have the right to freedom and independent life. Even in her parental home, she is seen as a sinner and subjected to meticulous and rigorous practice of rituals as a part of her widowhood. Once a married woman becomes a widow, she is not allowed to leave their homes and is expected to live as invisible beings as their very sight is considered as a misfortune or bad luck for others. Widows are compared to 'ghost' like beings in human form. In the Satras menstruation is considered to be greatest sin and no one touches a woman during her "monthly flow" because of the risk of contracting the impurity. (Goswami, 128) The married women with 'sindoor' (vermillion spot)⁵ on the forehead were

expected avoid any form of close contact with her. The compulsory religious rituals forced on the widows to go through continuous fasting, followed by a strict eating regime which includes abstaining from cooked food and surviving only on raw food such as vegetable for days, sleeping on a bed made of bamboos, wearing the arecanut⁶ trees bark as one's shoes, bathing or undergoing purification rituals even if she is touched by a low caste man. Thus the widows of the Sattras lived an invisible life shunned out from the rest of the world, forced to practice the religious rituals in the name of the greater good and the benefit of the community they belong. She is restricted from attending any public functions and made to live a secluded life. She is locked up in an isolated room whenever there is a function. On one such occasion Garibala the non-conformist widow gets a strong aroma of mutton curry hidden in the room where she was locked up. Unable to resist the smell of the tasty curry she started eating the curry only to be caught. She is thus accused of transgression an act of bringing about sacrilege to her caste and her status as a widow. When she returns to her in-laws home, the neighbors and her community scandalize Giribala's reputation for her close association with Mark Sahib. When the male members from her in-laws have come to take her she escapes to Mark Sahib seeking protection and acceptance from his side. But Mark Sahib, himself a marginalized person could not gather courage to forego his missionary life to take up the case of Giribala. So when she is discovered with Mark, the purification process of expiation of her sin is being arranged amidst chants of mantra of purification. But Giribala takes up this act on herself with her life by immolating herself in the fire of purification from which she does not come alive, a symbol of defiance against patriarchal establishment and orthodox norms.

Marginalization by Society, Culture, Religion and Caste system

The widows in Indira Goswami's novels are victims of the social structures where caste system and religious practices intermingle to frame laws and norms for women. Those who dared to challenge the established norms are considered impure and treated as transgressors for instance is the case of Giribala. Outcast in their own society, they are compelled to accept their widowhood and their sufferings as a part of their life. Two categories of women are visible in the novels—one that submits to the established and prescribed norms of the society without any resistance and the other category where the women resist and question the social structures, thus exposing the loopholes in the constructed system. The characters like Giribala and Saudamini are taken as rebellious characters in contrast to the docile characters like Durga, Saru Gossainee and Sashiprova and Mrinalini, who adhere to the traditional beliefs and practices of the society they belong to. Never the less both these categories of women meet the same kind of fate and treatment from the society irrespective of their assertive attitude towards the dictums of religion and society. They are rendered with the same fate of being marginalized, being imprisoned in the internalized marginalization. Saudamini and Giribala show resistance but are not allowed to gain their freedom from the established norms of the society based on culture, patriarchal tradition, Caste system and religious dogmas. They are weighed down by the enormity of the unbreakable social chains and get burnt out in the process of breaking it down. Unable to cope with social stigma that is associated with the widows, Saudamini sacrifices her desire to marry the Christian youth and jumps into the river Jamuna as an offering following her father who also sacrificed his life as an offering after giving her the permission to live her life of freedom. Giribala too was made to take up the extreme step of dying by the fire of purification when her attempts to escape for

freedom fail at every step. She crosses boundaries and enters forbidden zones only to be broken down physically and mentally. Left with no option she chooses death. Some scholars and researchers consider these characters as birth or “germination of New Women” (Papari Das, 2014), but at a deeper analysis, we find that these are characters who fail to attain their freedom in true sense. They are made to internalize their marginalization and accept them as act of fate or destiny. In a nutshell their attempts to break free from the clutches of the iron chains of social norms are always bulldogged down by the strictures and tools of patriarchal dominance.

Conclusion:

The widows in Indira Goswami's novels *The Blue-necked God* and *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* are forsaken victims of the society where freedom is only imaginary or wishful longings. They are prisoners of the multilayered caste system in the Hindu society where they fade into the wrinkles and folds of the undisputed and unbreakable practices in society. The caste system practiced by the various communities has local coloring where the degree of rigidity depends on the kind of region and the community they belong to. The caste hierarchy is portrayed by the characters in adhering to the strict regimes of maintaining purity and their constant effort made; to remain unpolluted from the low caste society. Goswami also tries to highlight the degree of discrimination in the name of religion, caste and culture that goes beyond the ordinary understanding of rituals which are used as weapons of suppression, oppression and inhuman sexual crimes. In all these practices the Brahmin widows are the most affected ones. They remain as mere 'bodies' tortured and tormented till they die. They find no solace even in the temples where they sing God's praise waiting for their eternal call. The widows are the marginalized lot where society forsake them and leave them to their fate. Through the novels

the writer locates them in historical time zone that is before and after India's Independence. Mahatma Gandhi, our father of the nation along with Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Ram Mohan Roy made several reforms for the emancipation of women but the miseries of widows remain same by and large. Indira Goswami, with the power of her pen portrays the lamentable state of the Brahmin widows whose lives are full of grief afflicted by in discernable rules scripted by the overbearing and imperious Patriarchy. Goswami's writings act as a mouth piece for the 'silent lamb' left to their fate 'unheard' and 'unsung' by deaf and dumb society where walls of religion and caste create an unbreakable chain. Goswami's voice for the widows is a wakeup call against gender discrimination in the Hindu society. Interest rekindles now on this issue due to the present Government's moves towards rehabilitation of these widows. Media has also taken up issues related to the problems of widows. Deepa Mehta's film "Water", produced by David Hamilton focuses on social issues like child marriage and widowhood

End Note:

1. "Other": Simon de Beauvoir's application of G.F.W Hegel's concept of the 'other' to describe a male-dominated culture that treats woman as the other in relation to man to analyse the dominator-dominated relation that historically characterized the relation between the sexes. In this context –it's the cultural context of the Man-woman binary where the 'Other' is a minority, the least favored social group.
2. Sattrā: Vaishnavite monastery in Amaranga situated in South Kamrup of Assam, India.
3. Braj: A place in Uttar Pradesh in India. It is also called Vrindavan, the place of lord Krishna
4. Bhajan: A type of Hindu devotional song.

5. Sindoor: is a traditional red or orange colored cosmetic powder, usually worn by married women along the parting of their hair. Use of Sindoor denoted that a woman is married in Hindu Community and ceasing to wear it usually implies widowhood.

6. Arecanut: The astringent seed of an areca palm which is often chewed with betel leaves.

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