

The Manifestations of the Downtrodden Women in Indira Goswami's Writings

Dr. Deepshikha Mahanta Bortamuly

Associate Professor, Department of English, Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi

Abstract- The downtrodden, in Indira Goswami's writings is variously manifested as women from diverse social layers suffering different types of oppression. A strong proponent of liberation of the oppressed Indian women, Indira Goswami signifies a relentless attempt to unshackle the soul of all the bindings that attempt to oppress and suppress it. Her life and her writings went hand in hand to unfold the suffering, the struggles and the beauties of life in a multifaceted manner. This paper explores manifestations of the downtrodden women in some of her writings.

INTRODUCTION

The projection of the downtrodden women is a prominent feature of Indira Goswami's writings. She foregrounds the downtrodden women in a style that is succinct, vivid and immediate since she perceived and felt suffering, oppression, marginalization in different contexts and locales. Her personal life is as varied in terms of experience as the characters she depicts in her novels – she was born in a traditional Vainshavite family in Assam and studied in a Christian Missionary school in Shillong. She married a South Indian engineer and went with him to the terrorist devastated Kashmir, where she lost her husband after eighteen months of marriage. Traumatized, and haunted with the compulsion of committing suicide, she spent a considerable time of her life in Vrindavan. Her teacher and guide Upendra Nath Lekharu played a significant role in shaping her life at this crucial moment, making her work commendably on Ramayana for her Ph. D. and encouraged her to go to Delhi, where she joined the University of Delhi and consequently served there as till the end of her professional life. She was declared a Professor Emeritus by the University in recognition of her illustrious life. Her in born talent as a writer was honed by her keen perception and the vast range of experience of sorrow, suffering and marginalization; and hence, her writings project and

also question the suppression of voices and the body politics of the socially relegated or downtrodden ones. Analysing the downtrodden and marginal identities in Indira Goswami's works, Kumar Sankar Bhattacharya (2011) says that based on "the paradigm shift where the marginals are not defined exclusively vis-à-vis the Empire and colonialism", Indira Goswami's works reveal "how local, heterogeneous issues, along with the politics of location, sometimes rework on subaltern and postcolonial theories by reducing subalternity to more of a relational than ontological identity."

This relational identity of subalternity is variously explored by Indira Goswami, who had a rebellious soul, rebelling against the norms of the society, rebelling against the oppressions heaped on the downtrodden, against the normal lethargic "living and partly living" kind of life that Eliot depicts of the Chorus in *The Murder in the Cathedral*. As a writer she does not belong to any particular canon – she can at best be placed among those free spirited souls that have created history as the path breaker in different languages at different places – Kamala Das from Kerala in Malayalam/English, Nadine Gordimer from South Africa, Taslima Nasrin from Bangladesh and so on. All these women are different, and unique. However, they share an indomitable spirit, which guides them through in their lives. In terms of the intensity of feelings, sometimes Indira Goswami reminds one of Sylvia Plath as well.

Indira Goswami brought into her writing fragmented syntactic structure, though not with the dispassionate characteristic of the English Modern authors. The discourse in her novels and stories is pervaded with angst and a shudder passed through the soul of the author and passed on to the readers. Life is given on a platter, the destructive forces of the society unfurling in every possible aspect on the protagonists in different locations across India in different socio-cultural contexts. What is similar in all her narratives

is an immediacy that drags the reader into the story where the persona/e, the narrator and author all get merged, providing a singular and unitary perspective to allow a larger truth to emerge out of the fragmented description. This paper provides an exegesis of some of her writings and delves into the details of some of them, exploring the projection of the woman as oppressed, marginalized and downtrodden and the voice they acquire in different manifestations.

One notable story that can be taken up here is *Sanskar*. The protagonist is created as Damayanti, a young Brahmin widow, and through her the complex and deep rooted psychological control of patriarchy and caste are explored. She is a victim of the situation in which everyone wants to take advantage of her plight by physically exploiting her. Abject poverty leads to prostitution and the bodily desire prompts her to discard all the social prohibitions heaped on a Brahmin widow. However, she is so completely caught in the mire of social sense of superiority of her Brahmin lineage that she aborts the foetus of the Sudra Mahajan. The Mahajan lost his first wife without an offspring and married again almost immediately only to be frustrated a second time, since the second wife also fails to give him a male progeny. In his drive for an heir, he neglects his ailing second wife in great infatuation of Damayanti, flames of passion for her beautiful body ignited by the inside information that she has been aborting and burying foetuses several times. The Mahajan thus keeps on spending on Damayanti and her children through a middleman, the priest Krishnakanta; the bedridden wife keeps waiting helplessly to breathe her last; and at the climax comes the priest on a dark stormy night to break open the information that Damayanti has aborted and buried the foetus since it is a polluted Sudra foetus on her Brahmin body. The story ends with the Mahajan frantically trying to unearth the foetus for a touch. The story is aptly termed ‘*Sanskar*’ highlighting the ravaging influences of social conventions, notions, beliefs, and rituals that predetermines individual perception through social premonitions and thus locks the self in various social apparatuses. For Friedrich Nietzsche, as Patricia Waugh (1992) asserts, “self is always a fiction, a willed unity masking a chaos of conflicting and contradictory desires...Authentic creation is not simply consciously directed and formulated will for it arises out of body: out of instinct and desire.” Here Damayanti creates and constantly

negates an assertion of the self in various conflicting claims of the body.

Thus in the story, Damayanti is a victim of the social constructs that make a young widow living in the outskirts of the village with only the two young children around, the most vulnerable target of sexual oppression. This has gone to such an extent that she has trained herself to use and extract money from those who come to enjoy her. Nonetheless, she is too proud of her Brahminical lineage to let the Sudra Mahajan marry her. The other victim in the story is the ailing second wife of the Mahajan who is given an almost eerie presence with her ever burning eyes that perceive everything as nakedly as possible. She is the alter ego of Damayanti: the Mahajan’s increasing indifference turning to cruelty towards her is described with ominous details as a parallel to and foreshadowing the cruelty of Damayanti. The two females are described in bodily terms in sharp contrast: Damayanti’s commoditized and objectified body as against the burning eyes of the bedridden second wife in the skeleton of a body. The story thus leaves an unforgettable experience in the minds of the readers.

Here, as in other stories and novels, Indira Goswami exhibits her excellence not in terms of innovative techniques of narration or intricate layers of themes, but in terms of the vivid expressions, heart-felt emotions, as well as strong characterization. Most importantly, she foregrounds significant questions about social injustice in any form. Several dominant trends of the second wave of feminism in India can be seen in Indira Goswami’s writings. Astrologers prophesized bad omen at the time of her birth and advised the parents to cut this child into pieces and throw it to the river Brahmaputra. She was brought up in the surrounding of the Satra – the island of Vaishnavite religious cult and the warehouse of culture – which left an unmistakable trace in her writings, particularly in *Dontal Hatir Uyen Khowa Howda* (The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker) with all its human fallibilities. The five hundred year old institution is unfolded from inside, with the tensions and the tussle between the individual and the society with its age old norms and conventions, prohibitions and inhibitions. After reading this novel, Bhisma Sahni commented:

“...this novel spans the entire society. Its reading is an unforgettable experience. Whenever my mind

wanders back to this sombre, penumbral and horrid atmosphere, I feel overpowered by awe.”

Morally and aesthetically violent images can be abundantly found in Indira Goswami’s writings. One is forced to share the eerie sensation of the heroine, Padma Priya in ‘Devi Pithar Tez’, while visualizing the slicing of oranges in water as a practice for beheading the sacrificial oxen at one stroke for Ma Kamakhya. ‘Bhikhyar Patra Bhangi’ is a novella that starts and finishes with violent images, expressions and situations. Phuleswari, the protagonist, faces social oppression, insult and suffering in a militant devastated village in Assam when people question her fidelity, the husband passes away, the son joins an extremist group, the elder daughter goes mad after being raped by the village Chaudhury’s son, the younger daughter deceived in a similar way by the local contractor. Several agencies of oppression are at work here and in the cruellest manner one can ever think of. The novel ends with Phuleswari being dragged to identify a bullet torn dead body suspected to be her son’s. The sentences break down at several points, as if they cannot carry on the emotions any further. There is another experiment here in terms of the language. The general framework is in Standard Assamese, but the conversations are provided in the Kamrupia dialect, which locates the novel at a particular space and gives a socio-historical association of the Lower Assam, where youngsters joined the extremist movement to get rid of the social evils they had to face. Most of these sincere volunteers persuaded a dream, spent years in different pockets of Bangladesh, Myanmar, China or Bhutan, had frequent clashes with the State army, or the arms-dealers or other underground operational forces and had a violent ending. Goswami was so touched by the extremist struggles that she left Delhi to explore different insurgency devastated areas to write her last novel on the Bodo extremists.

It is not just the body of the woman, with the desire of the male opportunist world around her, or the desire of the woman – physical, spiritual, emotional or otherwise, but the body of the oppressed as the site of conflicts leaving visible scars and making the struggle much more obvious and physical, that makes the writings of Indira Goswami special. ‘Parashu Patarar Nad’ (The Well of Parashu Patar) is a story with a difference since here we find a male protagonist, not the familiar female one, bugged by poverty, hunger

and ailment of his brother. Parashu, after relentless endeavour, gets the contract of digging a well in a barren land. It turned out to be a Herculean task. Then there was the more difficult task of getting the project passed and the money sanctioned from the government office. However, the novel ends with an unexpected twist when the Kabuliwala, the loan provider turns out to be a good human soul, waving Parashu’s loan to help him use his hard-earned money for the treatment of his ailing brother. This very Kabuliwala lies smeared in blood in the end by some unidentified gunman. Unexpected twists make the complacent reader readjust value judgments concerning social authoritative figures. Indira Goswami thus extends the notion of oppressed and marginalized woman to the marginalized, powerless common mass. The abundant examples of this notion of the marginalized make Indira Goswami not just a feminist but rather a humanitarian author. Analysing Indira Goswami’s perspective, Hiren Gohain(1998) comments:

“Most of her stories develop around sorrows and sufferings – around the deceits, the frustration and downfall that shakes one to the core.”

Indira Goswami created her own style and adhered to it all through, consistently. The Unfinished Autobiography (Adhalekha Dastabaz) reveals the traumatic stages in the life of the author and a very frank admission of struggle of a sensitive soul to survive in this harsh world. Amitabh Ghosh writes, “... Indira Goswami is one of those rare figures whose achievements as a writer are closely paralleled by their accomplishments as a social and political activist.” Towards the end of her long writing sojourn, she became an institution by herself in Assamese literature. When Indira Goswami was bestowed the Prince Claus Award, the jury remarked that her “powerful and lively descriptions and memorable images show how the body is central to human affairs, how political, religious and cultural systems affect the body and how the body determines life processes, gender, age, poverty and conflict” (Habib 2011). Indira Goswami has proved to be the touchstone transferring the oddities to assets, not just her personal oddities, but the oddities around her in a way that *all shall approve* in the time to come.

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