

Indira Goswami and the Experience of Widowhood Through Literature: Reading Subjective Experience as Voice in Literature

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Abstract

In patriarchal society the women's role is subjected to be controlled by restrictions. Under her outward virtuosity and moral code of conduct, a deep-seated suppression of her free choice, sexuality and sense of freedom are always sacrificed. In Indian Hindu culture, the worst phase of this extreme submission is reflected in the condition of widows. Different literary works from distinct parts of India with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, have charged these socio-cultural discriminations through the portraits of female characters, victimized and trapped into the condition of widowhood. From Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* in Bengali to Munshi Premchand's "Beton Wali Bidhva" in Hindi to Ismat Chughta's "Gaidan" in Urdu – indigenous writings have shown the marginalization of widows, numerous times. Indira Goswami is not just another name in the list rather she is the most important name who molded her personal experience as widow into literary enthusiasm. Unlike other writers, Goswami's fictions are not revolving around the passive representation of marginalized victims. Her understanding of the widowhood specially while living in Vrindavan has made her qualitatively able enough to portray the true psychological complexities of suppressed womanhood that goes beyond the depiction of social marginalization. In this paper, this is to be discussed that, how being a female writer in Assamese, Indira Goswami is presenting the feminist voice from the margin without being apologetic, turning suppression into power and marginalized widows as agencies of women against patriarchy rather than just victims of it and turning widowhood into a trope of criticism, through the reading of some of her select texts.

Keywords: Widow, Patriarchy, trope, psychology, society.

In Indian Hindu society, the traditional role of women is limited to household and child nurturing. Where women are already brought under social restrictions regarding their gender role, the condition of widows is worst. They are manipulated to be submissive to the roles of scriptures where they are ordered to practice a determined detachment from any kind of satiety. Indira Goswami, being a subject of widowhood, has experienced the horror of social restrictions and the annihilation of self. After coming back from being a widow in Vrindavan to a highly appraised scholar and writer, she has always tried to portray her own wounds through her fictional characters. In many of her novels and stories the female agencies are portrayed as widow and through them Goswami is showing up the grave realities of Hindu widows in specifically of the Brahmin caste, where the widows are vulnerable to merciless and highly restricted social prejudices. The widows are becoming the voice of feminist self that screams against the patriarchal oppressions, sometimes through the detailed description of all round suffering or through their courage to challenge the religious and social parameters, set for widows in specific and women at large. This paper will try to focus on some select texts where the criticism of patriarchal oppression has been portrayed through the trope of widowhood and it will try to locate how Goswami's subjective self as a feminist is negotiating the theme of widowhood from different perspectives to challenge the androcentric constructions and expectations.

Indira Goswami is an authentic Indian voice who has written in Indian language in post-colonial India and has attained national renown and international recognitions through translation. Though her writings are mostly in Assamese but later on, those got translated in English for greater readership beyond borders. She usually wrote all her novels, short stories, poems and autobiographical notes with the name Mamoni

Raisom Goswami as pen name. Her writings encompass a broad milieu of society specifically centered around the locale of Kamrup, Assam. A critical gaze on issues like Socio religious practices, class discrimination and oppression, political unrest of Assam, gender inequality and subjugation of women in typical Hindu society irrespective of class and caste, have been the themes of her different generic ventures. Her personal life had a great effect on her writings, even it can be said her subjective, personal experience has shaped her altogether writing journey. Malaya Khaund in her preface to *Indira Goswami: A Critical Study of Her Writings* has mentioned “All her novels are products of intimate personal experience and familiarity of subject matter” (v). Born in a Brahmin elite class in Assam she experienced all the religious turbulences in the tantric cult of Kamakhya. In very early age she experienced the horror of animal sacrifice in the temple of Bagla, when an astrologer advised her family to bypass the outcome of her disastrous placements of her stars. This experience later on got reflected in words through many of her stories “The Blood of Devipeeth”, “The Man from Chinnamasta” and other work, where the symbolic conveyance of her trauma gets intertwined with her criticism. Though the symbol of blood is not limited within the spectrum of animal sacrifice only. Her novels like *Pages Stained with Blood* are sensuous representation of the devastating communal riots, that reflects her experience in Delhi in during anti Sikh Riot in 1984. The political insurgencies of Assam as well has found expression in stories like “Breaking the Begging Bowl”. The protagonist Phuleswari, whose son gets missing during insurgency, represents the marginalized poor people of Assam who get subjugated by people in power. The landless poor widow mother, left to die in hunger with her daughter, not only evokes Goswami’s concern about the marginal people of the society, but also re-centers another most recurrent subject of her writings: the experience of woman in the patriarchal society. The question of marginality in the story is complex and gets unfolded like a tapestry with symbolic, thematic and linguistic approaches. From the use of local Assamese dialects, the flora and fauna of the villages of Assam, the political deprivation of Assam to the class oppression to the subjugation of poor widow women, all these different layers of marginality have been upheld in this story in particular and in all the writings in general. Goswami as a writer and as a social activist has worked against all kinds of marginalization but as an author, she has been mostly engaged with the experience of women in Hindu society in India. Her subjective experience as a young widow has molded her authorial voice, where as her poetic capabilities has made her able to turn those experiences in to words, symbols and characters in her fictions. She has been sent to Vrindavan as a widow after the loss of her husband, her stay there for several years made her experience the loneliness, suffering and restrictions that are faced by Hindu widows. After coming back and resettling herself as a scholar, professor, activist and a writer, all her subjective pain along with the sympathetic collective experience got expression. Most of her writings therefore, along with other layers of socio-political concerns, are centered around the experience of widowhood and the suffering. At the same time this experience is not one folded or straight. The pain or suffering is becoming either a situation where the protagonist is bound to express her inner psychological turmoil or take any action that challenges patriarchal structure or society. Thus, widowhood is becoming a trope to criticize the societal pattern where patriarchy expects women to behave in a certain way without paying a heed to women’s needs both physical and psychological. The female agencies in Goswami’s Novels are becoming an instrument for Goswami who are not submissive to the pattern rather rebels just like Goswami herself.

Now being specific, the paper will focus on few texts in details to elucidate how differently Goswami has played around the widowhood to challenge social expectations. The first novel to be discussed is *NeelKanthi Braja*, centering centered around the location of Vrindavan which is considered to be a place of peace, spirituality and happiness. The striking ironical contrast between the harsh reality and the myth of spirituality is the key interest of the narrative strategy. The story moves around the life of Saudamini, a young widow from elite class, who visits and stays in Vrindavan with her parents to bring a change and welcome a calm in life. The plan is executed by her parents to make her forget a Christian man whom she had fallen in love with and to break the connection. In India, widows often visit Vrindavan for solace and peace, but the reality is altogether different. Poverty stricken widows die in hunger; they beg for food and often they become Radheyshyamis (servants of

lord Krishna and Radha) in temples for existence. As Radheshyamis they often become victim to the desire of the male authorities in temples. The story narrates about two widows who fell for love beyond social expectations. First is Suadamini who is in love with a Christian, and secondly Sashi who falls for a Brahmachari though is sexually shackled within the grip of a priest Alamgiri. The expression of female longing, both physical and psychological, which remain unfulfilled, is finding possible expressions through the hollowness of widowhood. In case of both Saudamini and Sashi, widowhood brings about the lacuna, leading them to face a devastating loneliness. The denial from the society to have the persons they love is a result of religious restrictions and prohibition set for the widows. At the same time the loneliness of women is voiced because widowhood is creating that vacuum and extending it so far. “She felt like asking all those thousands of widows that constitute the citizenry of the holy town whether they have overcome physical desire, were they ever freed from that terrible loneliness” (Baruah 6). Saudamini's father feels the need of a man in the life of his daughter and allows the Christian man to meet Suadamini at the end of the story. It indicates that only the patriarchal authoritative father figure can decide the life decisions of a widow daughter. The meet with her lover does not change the life of the protagonist, rather she chooses to have control on her death if she does not have her control on her life. The suicide at the end is becoming a form of protest against the social gaze that a widow in particular goes through. Even her mother's societal gaze from patriarchal view point plays a vital role can't be separated from others. The pain she experienced from the society leaves only death as a choice. This denial of life is the denial of pain and injustice that she has gone through for her widowhood and social restrictions. Still the significance of the story is not about the suffering of the widows but in the expression of psychological nuances projected through the character of Saudamini.

A similar kind of narrative is coming up in her most famous and most discussed novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. The story revolves around a group of widows, Giribala, Durga, and young Mrs. Goswami. Durga is eldest and is a traditionalist who submits herself to the rules of patriarchy. She performs every ritual, and has channelized all kinds of her earthly desires into spirituality and orthodoxy. Her portrayal is a straight description of idealized image of widowhood that is a subject of pity only. Saru Gossai or young Mr. Goswami is exceptional, she is, young, attractive and a widow without any child. She is bold courageous and secretly has a weakness towards a Brahmin Mohidhar and dreams about her longings to be fulfilled with him only. Her inner femininity gets victimized by the deception of Mohidhar who takes advantage of her trust and tries to bankrupt her of her properties. On the other hand, Giribala, the alter ego of the author herself, is bold rebel who reflects a feminist approach of the authorial voice. The free feminine self that searches for love gets its culmination after the death of her unloving husband. Mark sahib, the Christian priest becomes impressive to her through a mutual, socially acceptable partnership that later on plunges into a devastating desire in the mind of the widow. The discreet meeting with Mark Sahib to attest her denial to social restrictions imposed on women and widows in particular. She expresses her disapproval to going back to her in-law's house and seeks shelter to Marks Sahib who, in spite of being cordial to Giribala, cannot provide. The author has plotted the concocted story to question the prerogative hegemony of patriarchy through religious practices that challenges the “other”: including both the woman and the European, as both are punished for breaking the social trajectory. Meanwhile the question, that Goswami is propounding, is the uncharted novelty of female desire both sexual and social. Saru Gossain and Giribala, both have urged for the freedom from the obstructions that the status as widow provides. Saru Gossain has fantasized Mohidhar and exercised a reversed gender role by giving shelter to him whereas Giribala's defiance of social expectation is perpetuated through her longing to the British man, even being a Brahmin widow. Consequently, the female sexual desire with subtle psychological suggestiveness becomes a motif that finds its configuration in narrative symbol of the fright of the elephant in musth, throughout the novel. At the end of the story, though, the sense of loss and unfulfillment is evident through the suicide of Giribala, the story itself caters paradoxically to the lacuna of widowhood that leads to the disastrous end. The dogmatic principals are contested through the microscopic view of humanity and ethics within

the periphery of widowhood and female psyche. Beyond the helplessness, the expression of the suppressed desire of feminine self which is usually denied in mainstream patriarchal discourse is give a voice though the insignia of widowhood.

The story “The Offspring” or “Sanskar” in Assamese, is another story which acclaims critical discussion on the portrayal of female agency within the orbit of widowhood. Damayanti, who is a Brahmin widow, gets engaged in prostitution as a survival mechanism for herself and for her two daughters. The choice itself is an attestation of her radical individuality challenging the norms. As the narrative proceeds, Pitambar, who is a lower caste childless Jamindar and a regular customer of Damayanti, demands a child from her in exchange of marriage. While caste politics is denouncing the idea of marriage, her choice to terminate the fetus is a drastic action that confirms her position to objurgate the social conformation. Her denial to the proposal of marriage is in way assures her complete authority on her own body and simultaneously a celebration of freedom over marital security to a lower caste. The advancement of the status of a wife is ridiculed when the Pitambar leaves his diseased wife for not being able to offer an offspring and goes to Damayanti. The widowed identity is in a way becoming an exposure to multifarious nuances of patriarchy and at the same time a challenge to those. Unlike other widowed protagonists, instead of being succumbed to the vulnerability of widowhood, Damayanti becomes a voice of self-resilience making her own individual choices over decisions made by male counterparts.

Therefore, through reading of different stories where widowhood has been a common motif, it is quite debatable to understand whether to take Goswami’s thematic setting as a general depiction of woman’s victimization or as a trope that are in other way enabling the widows to raise their voice and question the societal behavior towards them. Though the marginalization of women is very obvious in her fiction and in no way, she is talking about equality of gender, but at least her heroines are able to break the traditional stereotypes by challenging the societal expectations. She has not only picked up characters from upper class Hindu society but also from rural poverty-stricken lower class and in both of the settings the women have been vocal and outrageous through their actions. In novels there are questions not only in the mind of the female characters but in the minds of the readers as well to introspect the ideological mannerisms that society has constructed. Hiren Gohain in his essay “Ineffable Mystery” has said

“The sexual abuse of women by powerful males in a patriarchal society is a recurrent theme. So is the baffled search for sexual self-expression of the women, often crushed by the weight of custom and tradition and sometimes overwhelmed by their guilt and dread of transgression” .(27)

The point that is important for this paper is to note that all these complex utterances of suppression, resistance and guilt are possible within the configuration of widowhood and therefore “the inextricable combination of elemental rebellion against injustice and exploitation and a shocked sense of guilt lends a peculiar color to her quest” (Gohain 28) in every story related to widowhood in particular.

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