

Subaltern Voices in Indira Goswami' Novels

By

Dr. P.S. Sontakke

Guide & Assistant Professor of English

Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Karad, Tal. Karad, Dist. Satara, Maharashtra

Affiliated to Shivaji University, Kolhapur (India)

Abstract

Indian English literature tries to foreground the plight of unprivileged groups in order to bring them to the mainstream. Many Indian English writers tried to expose the real condition of different unprivileged groups and Indira Goswami is one of them. She is a well-known scholar of Assamese literature who speaks about the pathetic condition of subaltern groups, especially women in her literary creation. Her works are originally written in Assamese language and later on translated into English. Some of them are translated by Indira Goswami herself and some by others. Her novels thematically and characteristically expose the subaltern sections of Indian society. She voices the plight and sufferings of the subaltern. She points out the inhuman age old practices prevalent in the contemporary Indian society.

This research paper discusses the subaltern voices in Indira Goswami's selected novels.

Key Words - Exploitation, feminist, marginalized, subaltern, sufferings, practices, etc.

Introduction – Indira Goswami is also known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Mamoni Baidau. She originally belongs to Assamese literature. She is an editor, poetess, novelist and a critic. Her novels deal with challenges of women and other marginalized sections of Indian society. She skillfully combines subalternity and feminism in her writings.

The term 'subaltern' refers to the people or groups who are marginalized due to different reasons. Being subaltern is being marginalized and being deprived from the basic human rights by dominant class of the society. Marginalized people or groups are considered to be of low grade and inferior. They are the people, deliberately kept away from enjoying the social, political, religious and economic powers by dominant people. They are treated as inferior, weak and minor and are exploited, hence unnecessarily forced to suffer. Being unprivileged, they are misused by dominant classes of society under the practices of age old customs and traditions. At

contrary, dominant classes enjoy all liberties and luxuries of life. Indira Goswami tries to understand the contemporary conditions and customs responsible for the plight of unprivileged groups. Women are at the centre of writings. She finds that women fall victims to every social system. Her writings invoke the sufferings, she herself has already gone through, being a women. *The Blue-necked God (Nilakantha Braja)* (1976) is Indira Goswami's autobiographical novel which explores the physical, mental and financial exploitation as well as poverty of Indian widows under the practice of age old customs and traditions. This novel highlights the exploitation and poverty of widows, dumped in a sacred city to eke out of their days in prayer by uncaring, callous families under the guise of religious sanction and tradition. It depicts her mental agonies after the untimely death of her husband through the character of Saudamini. In order to come out of this grief, she decided to stay at the holy city of Vrindavan. For getting mental peace, in Vrindavan, she carried out research on *Ramayana* under the guidance of her father's friend, Prof. Upendra Lekharu. Unfortunately, even in this holy city Vrindavan, she witnessed the deteriorating condition of widows called as Radheshyamis. The physical, emotional, financial deprivation faced by the young widow has been woven into a perceptive text that drew on the author's own research and experiences as she roamed the streets of Vrindavan and exposed, for the first time, the uglier side of the city and its traditions

Another novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (2004) is set during Indian Independence period. It is basically written in Kamrupi dialect, a prestigious dialect in Assamese language. She has written this novel in Kamrupi dialect to keep the element of reality intact. This novel realistically represents the social conditions in South Assam. Here, Goswami describes the sufferings and sorrows of unprivileged groups, particularly women, who are left with nothing of their own and with none to take care of. Widows living a pathetic life in monasteries run by feudal monarchs form the basis of this novel. The widow characters discussed by Indira Goswami belong to a system called *Vaishnavite Sattra*. It is an appropriate and heart rendering description of Brahmin widows who lived in the four walls of *sattra* and were forced to give up their desires and hopes of life. Wrapped in white saree, they had to wait for their death within their marked world of closed boundaries, needless to say that they are deeply oppressed, isolated and losing their identity as a human being. They are also deprived of everything except their survival. Earlier, widows were forced into death in the name of *sati* tradition on the death of their husband. However, who did not follow *sati* tradition, were commonly forced to spend their

remaining life in the monasteries made for them, serving God. Three main widow characters Giribala, Saru Gossainee and Durga are victims of social inequity. They are kept neglected and tortured under the age old customs and traditions. They undergo strict rules regarding their clothes, food and social relations. They are kept away from so called polluting the pure society. They were systematically trained to forget their identity and live their life according to the dictation of inhuman norms prepared in accordance with the religious scriptures.

Three women characters Giribala, Saru Gossainee and Durga are typical Indian women who follow the norms of society without any complain. They believe that their condition is the result of their prewritten destiny that cannot ever be changed. They help in maintaining the hegemony of patriarchy and assist in perpetuating it. They do not protest or even speak against anything they face in their daily life. The psychology of these three women characters is the psychology of oppressed people in the contemporary Indian society. .

Her male character Indranath speaks for the betterment of women. He is a thoughtful person with human understanding. He feels pity for those young widows. He is the spokesperson of universal justice. He is portrayed as a reformer who opposes the differentiation between man and women in the Hindu social order. He asks his mother and aunt to get out of these age old customs and look after their land. Hence, he does not approve traditional social structure.

The novel *The Man from Chinnamasta* (2006) is the translation of Goswami's original novel *Chinnamastar Manuhtu* by Prasanta Goswami. It is written in the backdrop of Khamaykya temple of Nilachal hills. The novel is a vivid description of Goswami's experiences when she was a child. The novel talks against the age old practice of animal sacrifice. Kamakhya temple of Goddess Shakti is situated in Kamrup of Nilachal hills in Assam. It is believed to be a temple built because one of the parts of Sati's (Lord Shiva's consort and another form of goddess Shakti representing supreme feminine being) body, when it was broken into pieces by Lord Vishnu with his Sudarshan Chakra, to bring Shiva who had gone mad after the death of Sati and was wandering with her corpse from one place to another. There are several myths related to the origin of the temple. One of the prominent stories is that the Sanctum sanctorum of the temple is in yoni (vagina) shape. As it is in vagina shape, it has become the centre for the fertility cult. It has naturally grown as the place of worship for the people who want progeny. Hence, she becomes the goddess of fertility for her devotees.

The novel is an excellent example of vivid and heart rendering description of the plight of animals and human beings too. It is the story of Chinnamasta Jatadhari who is a mysterious tantric who had been a student of Banaras Hindu Vishwavidyalaya. It is also the story of Ratnadhar, a man who is a true disciple of Chinnamasta Jatadhari and of Dorothy Brown, who is a foreigner woman becoming a staunch disciple of Chinnamasta Jatadhari. It is also the story of Bidhibala, a girl who was forced to marry an aged man. Bidhibala fights against the inhuman traditions. There is an attempt to compare Dorothy Brown, an English woman with an Indian woman, Bidhibala. It is also an attempt to show that a woman, whether foreign or Indian, is given importance in the society just because she has a womb that would give birth to the child and perpetuate the race of men in the world.

Conclusion – Hence, Indira Goswami’s writings show that women are always treated as second gender in Indian society. She describes the women characters journey from their pathetic condition to a position where they can think about their wishes and dreams and can raise their voices against the orthodox social system. They are in position to raise their voice against their husbands and fathers to achieve absolute freedom. She writes realistically about the social conditions of her times. Her writing opposes rejection, oppression and ignorance of women by male dominative nature. She thinks that women have been given some importance because they give birth to children. Their sufferings are felt and expressed by Goswami because she not only witnessed the plight and pathetic condition, sorrows, sufferings, poverty, pain and tortures of these widows but also experienced them partially. Goswami’s experiences with these institutions empowered her to speak authoritatively about these issues. She speaks about the subalternity in general and women as the subaltern in particular. In each of these novels, subalternity forms the main theme and the anguish of the characters give rise to the feminist voices.

Works Cited –

- 1) Goswami, Indira. *The Blue Necked God*. New Delhi: Zubaan Fiction, 2013.
- 2) ----- . *The Man from Chinnamasta* (translated by Prashant Goswami). New Delhi: Katha, 2006.
- 3) ----- . *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. New Delhi: Rupa Co, 2004.
- 4) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mamoni_Raisom_Goswami
- 5) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mamoni_Raisom_Goswami#Novels