

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN AS CAGED BIRDS IN INDIRA GOSWAMI'S NOVEL "THE BLUE - NECKED GOD"

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Abstract

A bold narrator of human situation and social phenomena, Dr. Goswami carved a niche for herself at an early age. She authored over 25 novels and hundreds of short stories. She did several research works on the Ramayana. She enriched the Indian literary world through her translated works from Assamese to English, Hindi and also from other language to Assamese. She writes about what she has directly observed and tried on her pulses. Her novel the blue necked god was published in 1976. The subject of her stories is generally the outcaste or the waste of the society. Whether it is the Brahmin widows, or share croppers and poor peasants, or forsaken lovers, despondent youth, victims of riot or helpless animals, there has always been an element of pathos in her characters and her fictions. It is this pathos that provides a fundamental element of beauty to her fiction.

Keywords: Marginality, Widowhood, Patriarchy, Social issues.

Introduction

Nilakanthi Braja (1976, Blue-necked Braja): the background is Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh. The plot revolves around the plight, the exploitation and miserable lives of Brahmin widows who spend their remaining years in the holy city of Vrindavan, in the hope of 'mukti' and salvation.

"Indira Goswami is one of the top Indian writers who have made a significant contribution to various branches of literature. Her canvas is wide and includes impressions of life and people in all their spectacular varieties and richness, the Jnanpith selection board stated" (22).

Dr. Indira Goswami was one of the preeminent literary scholars in Assam. Her novel Neelkanthi Braj was written based on her experience while living in Vrindavan as a researcher. She was researching on comparative study of the Ramayana. The novel Neelkanthi Braj is an exploration of the terrible misery and helplessness that the countless

widows in Vrindavan suffered every day and in almost all aspects of life. Most of these widows were from then East Pakistan and west Bengal. They were of all ages, from young to old. But the common thread that bound them was that their cause for being in the town was similar- being rejected or becoming unwanted in their own families for being widows. The novel was published nearly 30 years ago (1976) and at that time, it was a path- breaking work of fiction on the subject of the Vrindavan widows. In fact, the research for the novel made Dr. Goswami extend her stay in the town even after her own research on the Ramayana was over. It's true; life has changed for the widows today. Many organizations are engaged in their uplift. But those days, their condition was woeful. The novel became like a social document of the wretched life of the 5000 add widows who spent their life singing, begging, waiting for rotten vegetables from the vegetable vendors...awaiting death and freedom from life. Her autobiography Adha Lekha Dastabez (An Unfinished Autobiography) also contains a chapter on the Vrindavan widows. The Nepalese translation of her autobiography received the Sahitya Akademi award. Her autobiography is now a prescribed textbook in many universities in India.

Background of Vrindavan

Vrindavan is the backdrop of her novel Neelkanthi Braja (1976) in which she has painstakingly recreated the atmosphere of the Braja region, held sacred by the devotees of Radha and Krishna with all its contradictions: the glorious tradition of Hindu philosophy, art and devotion and the squalor, misery and corruption rampant in Vrindavan. She describes the turbulent history of the town, the abundance of Hindu relics desecrated by Muslim invaders, the maze of narrow lanes and alleys, the profusion of small and large temples, the bathing ghats and cremation grounds on the banks of the flowing Yamuna, the numerous fairs and festivals that are organized all the year round and the crowd of pilgrims, pandas and beggars that throng the streets. The novel describes the travails of three women, trying to come to terms with their circumstances. Mrinalini is an aging spinster burdened with the responsibility of her blind and crippled father and insane mother. Her father Thakur Sahib has squandered his wealth in dissolute living and is forced to sell off his remaining property and take shelter in a novel. Her mother clutters the place with discarded junk and gets into a frenzy from time to time. Mrinalini sees no future for herself. Her dream of marriage and motherhood withers away as they sink into abject poverty and she waits for her old parents to die. Her only friend is Sashiprabha, a young widow, in the service of an elderly, impotent priest called Alamgadhi and hopelessly in love with a young Swami whom she can only gaze at from a distance. She is one of the many widows in Vrindavan who are 'united in prayer' to temple priests for physical protection and in the hope of receiving a decent funeral after they die. Sashi is grateful to Alamgadhi for giving her shelter and not molesting her physically but her young spirit craves for a

stronger, more passionate relationship. The humdrum routine of her life is disrupted when their temple which was the property of Thakur Sahib is sold off and Alamgadhri loses his position as a priest. Sashi is left alone to fend for herself. She is too old to make a living by making garlands or grinding sandal paste as she did when she was a child and too young to beg for alms like the Radheshyamis. She takes shelter in a ghetto but the old women living there threaten to throw her out because she is a target for the predators in Vrindaavan: man high on liquor and bhang and forever on the prowl for unprotected young women. Her situation reaches a crisis after the death of Alamgadhri and her frantic but unsuccessful search for a kindly patron who would protect her from the wild men of Vrindavan. Thrown out of her hovel by the Radheshyamis and running for her life through the alleys at night where dangers lurk at every turning, she finally knocks of the door of her friend Mrinalini, who, inspite of her own precarious situation offers her consolation and shelter, however temporary. "The two women badly battered by circumstances and scared by the prospect of grim and uncertain future lay on the damp floor, embracing each other, as if for assurance, like two infants." (32).

Women as Caged Birds

Saudamini, the protagonist of the novel, is a young woman who has lost her husband soon after her marriage, seven years ago. She has fallen in love with a Christian, violating the strict code of a Hindu widow. Though her lover remains a shadowy figure in the narrative, his existence is an indication of the turmoil in Saudamini's mind. Her pious and conservative parents bring her to Vrindavan in the hope that she will find peace in the environment of the holy town and accept her misfortune with equanimity. Her father, Dr. Roychaudhary starts a hospital for destitute patients and soon acquires a reputation for his selfless service. He expects that the suffering of the people would arouse Saudamini's compassion and she would willingly join his enterprise. His wife Anupama takes saudamini to visit holy places and people like Deogharibaba in the hope that she would get reconciled to her misfortune and be at peace with her. Saudamini makes a sincere effort to submit to the will of her parents but is seized with a secret rebelliousness and a growing sense of loneliness and despair. She refuses to accompany her mother on a circuit of the shrines of Braja and loses interest in assisting her father at his hospital. She wanders restlessly around, observing the flow of life in Vrindavan, taking in its beauty as well as its ugliness, talking to different people in the hope of finding answers to the questions troubling her mind, but the enlightenment she is seeking eludes her. She has strange fears that the walls of her room would collapse and crush her or that she would turn into a dehumanized ghost like some of the Radhashyamis. She tells her friend, the artist Chandrabhanu about the depression that has taken hold of her and the waves of passion and desire that overpower her when she sees young couples making love on the river bank. She asks a pious old Radhashymi whether she has overcome desire and to her astonishment the

woman confesses that she has not been able to control it, despite struggling with it all through her youth. Even now when she touches her prayer beads, their smoothness reminds her of chameli blossoms, which she associates with youth, desire and the sight of young students she encountered while walking through a garden.

As Saudamini battles with her feelings of despondency and guilt, she meets other people who have come to terms with their suffering through faith or artistic expression. A young, untouchable widow, who is debarred from entering the Lord's temple, dances in abandon on the river bank in an ecstasy of devotion. The artist Chandrabhanu finds solace in carving beautiful images though there are no buyers for his creations. When Saudamini's restlessness reaches its peak, one night her old father enters her room and tells her that he understands her predicament and has written to her Christian lover to come and take her away before he and his wife leave the world. In a dreamlike sequence that follows, Saudamini waits for her mysterious lover with her father's tacit approval and goes out to meet him on a cold, dark night a few months later. As she moves towards the river bank she hears the sweet melody of the shehnai coming from the temple and her feet are caught in the red scarf of a married woman who was fortunate enough to die before her husband. Her lover, a shadowy figure, takes her into his boat and they make love while a storm rages outside. Is the lover a man of flesh and blood or a creation of Saudamini's overcharged mind or is he Death, for whom she has been waiting eagerly as the woman united with her lover and not as a widow. The conventional ending of the novel does not, however, take away from the frank description of the thwarting of a widow's sexuality and the blighting of young lives by cruel circumstances.

"But if you had become radheshyamis singing bhajans in the temple, you would have been assured of at least two square meals a day" (65).

Notwithstanding its celebration of the youthful love of Radha and Krishna, Vrindavan is portrayed as an old and decaying town, the refuge of people in their last stage of life. Mrinalini, Sashiprabha and Saudamini live in the shadow of death; their guardians and protectors are incapacitated by old age and on the verge of extinction. Each one of them is haunted by the prospect of joining the ranks of the ubiquitous Radheshyamis, the destitute widows of Vrindavan, who have been abandoned by their families in the name of religion and live on the edge of survival in foul-smelling, ramshackle hovels, begging near the temples or singing devotional songs at the bhajanashrams for a pittance. The money provided for their upkeep by rich donors or temple trusts is pocketed by corrupt officials and the younger women are forced into prostitution or 'united in prayer' with priests and pandas. Some of them belong to educated and respectable families but have been degraded by extreme poverty, incurable diseases, sub-human living conditions and are subjected to every kind of indignity. Many of them just wait for death with their meager savings tied in their waistbands, hoping to be given a decent funeral. Frequently their corpses are

plundered by the pandas or even their own mates for any chance possessions, and then thrown unceremoniously into the Yamuna.

“Give us some donation to keep us alive. You people live to eat, but We need to eat something in order to live. Give us something to keep us alive”(21).

Conclusion

Numerous stark images of the Radheshyamis are scattered throughout Neelkanthi Braja. When Saudamini approaches them in a spirit of compassion and friendliness, they surround her and begin to molest her, pulling her cheeks and hair, and seem to be ready to tear her limbs apart till she is rescued by a Sadhu and warned to stay away from them. At the bhajanashram they are compelled to sing the praises of Radha and Krishna under the watchful eyes of their supervisors even though they might be sick or starving. Old Radheshyamis are chased molested by drunken louts in an orgy of sex and violence and live in constant fear of physical assault. On festive days they gorge themselves on rotting food given to them in charity till they fall sick. No other novelist has given such a graphic account of the neglect and exploitation of widows. Their shaven heads, their foreheads covered with turmeric and sandalwood paste, their limbs crippled by leprosy and their starving bodies showing through their ragged saris are brought vividly to life by Indira Goswami's pen.

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