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Germination of New woman in the Fictions of Indira Goswami: A Study of the characters of Giribala and Saudamini

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Abstract

'Angel in the house', 'second sex' is the designation given to the woman by the phallogocentric society which determines their gender roles. Women are the home makers and the men are the bread earners. They are expected to be submissive and docile. But in the late nineteenth century, transgressing the traditional norms and gender roles laid by the patriarchal society, the woman begins penetrates into a new world with new roles. Such a woman who challenges the traditional roles of 'the angel in the house' is termed as new woman, in literature. This paper is an attempt to focus on the germination of new-woman in the fictions of Indira Goswami, on the basis of the study of the two characters—Giribala and Saudamini of "the Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker" and "the Blue-Necked God", respectively. Non-conforming the conventional construct, Goswami's pen has given birth to two radical characters, Giribala, and Saudamini who flouts the long-established norms laid down in the Assamese culture for the widows. Goswami has projected the plights of the marginalized widows 'encased in the sattrā' and in the holy city, Vrindavan, and the catastrophe of their widowhood, in her celebrated novels "The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker" and "the Blue-Necked God".

Key Words: *new-woman, widowhood, patriarchy, defy, non-conformist, autonomy.*

Introduction: "New Woman" is a term devised by the Irish writer Sarah Grand in her article *The New Aspects of the Woman Question* (1894). Later on, the British-American writer Henry James propagated the term to portray the metamorphosed women in Europe and the United States that defied the conventional gender roles and acclaimed themselves as educated, autonomous and feminist. Their effort is to challenge the "angel in the house", a hegemonic expression to subjugate the woman. "The term New Woman always referred to women who exercised control over their own lives be it personal, social, or economic" (Palmer 1993: 2). Grand included "many elements associated with this agent and representative of social change: attacks on sexual double standards; demands for better employment and educational opportunities for women; frankness about matters like venereal disease and sex education; and questioning of traditional attitudes towards marriage and woman's place in the family and in relation to motherhood" (Drabble 2000: 723) in her own novels, like *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) and *The Beth Book* (1897). The new-women labours to demarginalize themselves and announce their autonomy and individuality. They are the new generation women who challenge their progenitor role of compliance and docility and establish themselves as self-assured and independent. These new-women marks their emergence in both drama and fiction of the late nineteenth century. In drama they appear primarily in the work of Henrik Ibsen, Henry Arthur Jones and George Bernard Shaw. In fiction, on the other hand, the works of Sara Grand, Olive Schreiner, Annie Sophie Cory, and Ella Hepworth Dixon introduces such radical characters. Among the Indian writers who apprise the Indians concerning the new-woman includes the names of Arundhati Roy, Sashi Deshpande, and Indira Goswami, who create certain memorable uncompromising female characters in their novel. Roy's Ammu, Deshpande's Saru and Goswami's Giribala and Saudamini are the recognized rebels and radical female characters. Regarding Goswami, eminent Indian writer Amitav Ghosh says: "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."

The present paper attempts to focus on the germination of new-woman in the fictions of Indira Goswami, on the basis of the study of the two characters—Giribala and Saudamini in *the Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* and *the Blue-Necked God*, respectively. *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* is the tragedy of widowhood in the Gossain (Brahmin) society. Gossains are the religious and spiritual heads of the *sattras*¹ and are placed in the superior position than the ordinary Brahmins. *The Blue-Necked God* brings the predicament the Hindu widows in the spotlight. Originally written in Assamese and later on translated into many other languages, the book raised many eyebrows with its graphic portrayal of the plight of the widows in Vrindavan.

Portrayal of Women in *the Blue-Necked God*: Set in the holy city of Lord Krishna, Vrindavan, the novel features the exploitation and deprivation of widows forsaken in a sacred city to eke out their life in meditation of God by cold, callous families under the placard of religious sanction and tradition. Saudamini is one such character in the novel. She had lost her husband and the family brought her to Vrindavan. But, in the shape of Saudamini, Goswami has given birth to a new generation woman who refused to be a bird in prison and demanded her freedom. Saudamini's mother, Anupama, on the other hand was a God fearing woman who could not tolerate her daughter's radical behavior and ultimately embraced her untimely death due to utter dejection and disappointment.

The widows in the *Braja*² had right to seek pleasure, bodily or otherwise but to submit their lives to singing Lord Krishna's praises in the temples of the sacred town where they were invariably exploited by wolves in human shapes. Their bodies ravaged, their minds broke, due to their penury and lack of family support. Even after the death of the widows of the *Braja*, due veneration was not donated to their dead bodies. People fought for the meager possessions of the poor dead women. Sometimes while fighting some of the blows hit the dead bodies too. But nobody cared about such things in *Braja*. On the other hand, the young widows in the *Braja* had lost their right to live with self-esteem. They were the unremitting victims of sexual abuse as "*there was no dearth of wicked and licentious people in Braja.*" The priests kept destitute women in their rooms who served as a helper in the temple duties during the day time and after sunset accompanied the priests in their beds. However, they cloaked their illicit or forbidden associations beneath the placard of *Jugal Upasana*³. Sashiprova, one of such unfortunate women, for her personal security had to live with Alamgari but being a eunuch he was unable to harm her though he attempted it. Sashi was compelled to live with Alamgari for her personal security and sustenance as she was young and '*there would be men after her*'. She would have to grow old '*when her body would be emaciated and dried up, like a mangy street dog*' to move about freely in the *Braja*.

The Character of Saudamini: Saudamini is the protagonist in the novel. She was a widow and arrives in Vrindavan with her father Dr. Roychoudhury and his wife, as Saudamini "had started having an affair with a Christian youth soon after she became a widow". By nature she was a rebel, a non-conformist. She was spontaneously drawn by her curiosity to walk on the forbidden avenue. She went wherever she was asked not to and did whatever was prohibited and was asking the same question often to herself—*was there ever another girl who had to face such a situation? Has anyone like me ever come to this sacred land of Braja?* (Bhattacharyya 2013: 107) She was looking for a rebel like hers in the *Braja* but could find nobody. Her father wanted her to sacrifice her residual life in the service of the sick and needy but she loved a free life. She felt like "death come faster in the *Braja* than in other place'. She protested and demanded for her autonomy: *I cannot spend my entire life like this, doing charity work...I am not a devi, I am an ordinary girl, and cannot pass all my years in serving society like you...I am an independent person, and fear no one and nothing!* (Bhattacharyya 2013: 71). Saudamini was a 'fallen woman' in the eyes of the society, a young woman who *roams about alone all over the place! The immoral fool!* Contrasting to this image of hers, the author has probed deep into the mind of hers and brought her real self with a significant interrogation: "*She had numerous admirers before Subroto, her husband, had come into her life and shown her how divine true love could be. But inspite of the pleadings and persuading of her admirers, she had never given in to them, had never allowed any of them to take liberties with her body. No, she had never done such*

¹ Vaisnavite monastery

² Braja or Braja Dham refers to the holy city Vrindavan

³ Divine-worship in pair/couple

things. So then, why was she in this situation?" (Bhattacharyya 2013: 171) Saudamini loved the Christian youth and wanted to live with him but not at the cost of her father's life. When she could understand that her father offered his life to the Jamuna after he had set her free, she could not sustain her freedom and surrendered her life, too, to the river Jamuna.

Portrayal of Women in the *Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*: The setting of the novel, *the Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*, is the Amranga Sattrā, in South Kamrup in Assam, at the dawn of independence. In the novel, Goswami has focused the relegation of women in the Brahmin society in general and the marginalization of the widows in particular. As she has painted, in the Gossain/Brahmin society, widows were treated as sinners. They were considered as inauspicious and thus were kept at arm's length from any auspicious occasion in their family or elsewhere. They spent their residual life within the four walls of the house and never watched the road outside. In the novel, Durga represented such characters that tolerated everything in silence. In fact she internalized everything and passively accepted all that had been inflicted upon her by her in-laws. She could never think of going to court even to fight for her rights: *Could she go to Gauhati to demand her share of property? Impossible! Impossible!* (Goswami 2004: 14) Saru Gossainee, another conformist, consoled miserable Durga when her gold ornaments were stolen as *it's our fate that we are born as women. We should learn to lead our lives with patience and tolerance* (Goswami 2004: 99). The widow Gossainees led a very miserable life. They were devastated by deprivation and diseases. Sometimes they were tortured callously by their in-laws. In case of Giribala *her mother-in-law's torture had crossed the limit...this is the reason why her unborn child was destroyed in her womb...why, she was not even allowed to go to latrine during amoti⁴!... and she could get down from her cot only after wearing betelnut bark sandals on her feet* (Goswami 2004: 30) They were not even endorsed to read and to learn. Widow re-marriage was like a sin in that society.

Goswami has foregrounded the wretched condition of the women sustaining the patriarchal Brahmin society as a backdrop. Child-marriage was customary among the people. A girl had to get married before she attained puberty or her family would be ostracized. Thus, their fathers were desperate for getting their daughters married. The girls were meant to occupy themselves in domestic concerns and were shorn of the nectar of education: *Here girls from Gossain households still don't go out in public, let alone to school* (Goswami 2004: 66). They would say: *What's the use of intelligence in a girl? It will bring nothing but blemish on the family's name. Women's education is of no* (Goswami 2004: 286). Apart from all these, the husbands perpetrated ineffable tortures upon their wives. These Gossains' sticks, sometimes, rained blows on the back of the unfortunate women and were sometimes beaten up to death or they themselves committed suicide, failing to tolerate their husbands' tortures: *There was an unused well near Matia Pahar that was considered haunted...they hauled out many skeletons of women* (Goswami 2004: 213). Wife of Bamdeo Maujadar underwent the same fate as her husband had an affair with a nurse. The society lingered finger on its lips in case of a polygamous man; however, it raised the same finger to curse the woman who did the same act even after her husband's death. A Gossain could have an affair with a low caste woman but a Gossainee was never allowed to think about it even in her dream. If they did so they had to undergo certain purification rituals.

All these things are depicted very lucidly and superbly in the novel. Goswami has clicked a 1948 picture in the form of the novel, which she has stated in the very beginning. By the end she gives us another very brief picture of 1981 where she has captured a changed picture of the society—the inter-caste marriages were acceptable to certain extent; the Gossainees went to Gauhati to fight for her cause or were seen to be the accused of forgeries; girls began to go to school like the boys, some had even become important officers. However, the thing that had not changed is the exploitation of women: *Nowadays Bihari traders or Kabuli merchants hailing from Kabul sometimes make a round of the sattrā conspicuously. They lure some low-caste girls away with dreams of marriage or even marry them with due ceremony. But alas, these girls either come back ruined and disgraced, or they are sold in the flesh trade* (Goswami 2004: 345)

The Character of Giribala: Goswami has portrayed the exceptional character of Giribala, a Gossain widow who defied the traditional norms set by the patriarchal Gossain society. When she came from

⁴ Four days in the month of July when the earth is supposed to menstruate

her in-laws' house to her paternal home after the attainment of widowhood, the neighbourhood women came to see her and were talking and discussing about her misfortunes. Giribala could not tolerate it and she came out of the puja room bursting the door open *like a tigress in rage. Her hair had come undone and flew wildly. Her gatala⁵ had come off and her clothes were in disarray...She screamed. "I am alive! I will live on and have a better life than all of you..."* She was not happy with her conjugal life. Her husband had lots many affairs. She remembered his words: *Since we are already married...you'll have to tolerate some of my habits...I love women. I like their company* (Goswami 2004: 140). This hurt her very much. She had no affection for him and thus a vestige of blues was not there in her eyes for her dead husband. Every time she remembered him, she thought of his affair with the low caste woman from Maniari Chowk. She wasn't a conventional Gossain widow but a transgressor who *did not want to exist, just for the sake of remaining alive*, did not have any devotion for her dead husband who *touched and played with that notorious woman who sold opium*, and did not want to follow the path of Durga. Her inner most being whispered to Mark Sahib—*Oh! Please! Take me out of this wooden coffin! Please! I beg you* (Goswami 2004: 153). Giribala was contradictory to Durga; where Durga was a conformist, Giribala was a non-conformist. She was a 'new' figure who wanted her liberation and wanted to lead a halcyon life, different from the life led by Durga and Saru Gossainee. She could not dominate her desires and traversed the margin laid for the widows. On an occasion when she smelt the smell of delicious mutton curry, she could not resist herself, *she forgot everything...religion and rituals, wisdom or restraint...started gulping it down in great haste...*(Goswami 2004: 144). For a Gossain widow it was a heinous act; even to smell the aroma of forbidden food was a great sin. But she was sick and tired of the boiled rice and pulses with the boiled vegetables and a pinch of salt, which she had to gulp every day. Her conscience was not permitting her at the beginning but later on when she recalled her husband's perfidy her conscience stopped intruding. On witnessing it Durga fainted and Gossainee, catching hold of Giribala's braids, kicked her, punched her and clawed at her. Giribala had to undergo purification rights as Goswami has said—*this drama of purification and ritualistic atonement went on for quite a long time* (Goswami 2004: 147).

Giribala was encouraged by Indranath, her elder brother, to carry on her education. She was happy when she was nominated by her brother to help Mark as she would not be engaged within the four walls like Durga. Giribala had a soft corner for Mark Sahib. His self-less devotion to the needy, poor and marginalized, touched her heart and believed that it was just Mark who would be able to liberate her. It was just Mark who could provide her everything including her biological needs. But he would not touch her as he knew his margin. In utter frustration she begged the mad elephant to kill her. By the end of the novel, she entered into his hovel, forcefully, in a stormy night. She said *I will not go back to that graveyard! I don't want to be buried alive. I'd rather die* (Goswami 2004: 295). She crossed all the barriers and wanted him to satisfy her physical needs. But Mark was not as brave as her. When she was caught red handed they dragged her out and prepared to purify her as she had committed the sin of having illicit relations with a low-caste man. But Giribala, a 'new-woman' would not accept it and sacrificed her life in the same hut that was used for her purification rights and then set on fire.

Conclusion: Though *sati* was abolished, in a sense it was still existed. Physical immolation was replaced by mental immolation. Indira Goswami has created such a society in her novel where women were marginalized to great extent, especially the widows. But by creating the character like Sashiprova, Anupama, Gossainee (Giribala's mother) and Durga, she has also thrown light on the fact that generation after generation the women were internalizing their marginalization and passively accepting their conditions as their fate. But amidst these conformist and orthodox characters, Goswami went on to create two women characters, Giribala and Saudamini, who ventured to roar for their autonomy, and preferred to give up living than to live in prison. They challenged the norms laid by the patriarchal society to marginalize and exploit women. They defied the religious barriers. Where Saudamini was supposed to have love relationship with a Christian youth, Giribala offers herself to herself to Mark in a dramatic climax. Thus, they claim their sexual autonomy. They were the budding 'new woman', who were new in their outlook and contemplations; who thought and worked

⁵ A piece of cloth draped over the shoulders by Assamese women from South Kamrup

differently deconstructing the conventional gender roles and demanding their autonomy. Although they committed suicide by the end of the novels, the suicidal act does not seem to represent their defeat; rather it symbolizes their freedom; freedom from the curse of widowhood, from unspeakable suffering, from mental immolation.

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