

THE POLITICS OF MAKING SUBALTERN THROUGH PATRIARCHY AND TRADITION IN THE BLUE-NECKED GOD

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ABSTRACT

The subalternity of women has always been an extremely sensitive and crucial topic across works of literature. The text The Blue-necked God adequately portrays the aspects of women's manifold sufferings. Since India is culturally a very diverse country, women portrayed in literature are also exploited according to their different social and traditional structures. It is generally seen in literary texts that women are being exploited in society through many religious and traditional norms. In India, many traditional norms are followed and the existence of these norms compels women to follow strict codes of conduct. These codes of conduct are patriarchal and are mostly drawn from religious institutions that have historically tried to undermine women. In The Blue-necked God, it is observed that the subalternity of women is dominated by religious and traditional issues.

KEYWORDS: *Brahmanism, Women, Subaltern, Patriarchy, Tradition, Religion, Suppression, Exploitation*

INTRODUCTION

The word "subaltern" has different layers of meaning. "Subalternity" is a term that refers to the oppression of people living in the third world countries. In other words, "subalterns" are those people who do not have basic recognition in a developing country. In a developing nation, there are various groups of people in the social structure who are divided according to their class and caste hierarchies. In such a structure, the lowest or the oppressed groups under the ruling groups may be defined as "subalterns". The subalterns are exploited in many ways viz. socially, politically, economically, culturally, racially, etc. In postcolonial studies and critical theory, the term "subaltern" encompasses those people who are socially, politically, and geographically outside the hierarchy of power of a state. Though the colonisers declared the independence of the third world countries, yet in a sense, they only transferred their power and control to the elitist class groups. These upper-class groups continued to exercise control over the minorities after the declaration of independence. The elitist class started exploiting the lower class in different ways. In India, the elitist classes have been dominating the mass population in the name of class, caste, and religion. This system of domination over the lower classes by elitist class enlarged the subaltern class and their subalternity. The elitist groups have been continuously dominating the subaltern subjects for ages. Moreover, the subalternity of Indian subaltern subjects has always been catalysed by the age-old traditional and cultural norms. Several customs and traditions are bound to certain groups of society to follow strictly. Such customs and professions are carried out from generations to generations. The lower caste groups are dominated by the upper caste groups and the lower class groups are dominated by higher-class groups. On the other hand, patriarchy and gender issues are yet other important factors in the existence of subalternity. The women subjects within the subalterns are

more suppressed in society. During the colonial period though the colonisers had taken many steps to protect women from native patriarchal society, they had their own agenda, as they wanted to emerge as champions of the cause of the women as victims. In her influential essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states that the paradox of representation of voiceless, "white men saving brown women from brown men" versus Indian nativists who say that "the women actually wanted to die". Spivak brought attention to the readers; "the problem of representation" of third world women by western scholarship. She deconstructs in her essay to examine, 'how truth is constructed' and to deploy the assertions of one intellectual and political position to 'interrupt or bring into crisis another'.

Indira Goswami is one of the most popular names in Assamese literature. She is also known by her pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami. Referring to the depth of her writings, she can also be considered one of the pioneers of Assamese modernist literature. Her subjects of writings touch various areas like widowhood and women, suffering and exploitation, tradition and rituals, etc. Predominantly, portrayal of women suffering has been a recurrent topic in her works. The present paper aims to see and show women's subalternity in the text *The Blue-necked God*. In the selected text, the issues of women have been influentially portrayed. It is rightly said that "India is a rich country where poor people live". Similarly, the subalternity in Indian society is invisible in the surface level. But, when we go into the depth of society, we could discover many layers of subalternity. The subalternity of Indian women is prevailed with many issues like caste, community, class, religion, tradition, gender, politics, history, migration, economy, etc. In India, there are many holy places which are related to beliefs and practices of holy living and holy dying. Such places associated with holiness are like Banaras, Puri, Brindavan etc. Indira Goswami had set this novel in the very holy place of Brindavan where Lord Krishna was believed to have loved his beloved Radha and her friends.

In the very opening chapter of the novel *The Blue-necked God*, patriarchy and tradition are very dominantly portrayed. Dr. Roychoudhury and Anupama along with their widow daughter arrive at Mathura railway station. Although they wanted to pass their old age peacefully in Brindavan this would not happen because a few months back their only son-in-law, Saudamini's husband had suddenly died. Again, Saudamini had an affair with a Christian person which seemed more problematic to them. They have come to Brindavan with good hope that living in Brindavan could bring peace and solace to Saudamini. It is patriarchal and traditional rules which stop Saudamini from speaking against her parents. She is a very young and attractive lady who falls in love with a Christian person. But she fears her parents and society. Her parents are anxious about the question of self-prestige. If Saudamini would marry a Christian man their reputation will no longer exist in society. The societal rules stop them from allowing their daughter to marry a man of a strange religion. Saudamini too thinks that her actions against her parents and society would only bring regret to her. From the very beginning to the end of the novel, she tries to overcome the cruel shadow of patriarchy and tradition. Wherever she goes she questions herself as well as others that why she is bound to stay in Braj? Saudamini suffers from loneliness and depression, she questions to other radheshyamis, "Did you also face a situation similar to mine?. She wondered if she was a sinful woman. Whether what she was thinking was a sinful act.... "And what about your physical hunger? Tell me the truth," persisted Saudamini" (Bhattacharyya, 166,167). The psychological impact of patriarchy and tradition is so predominating in her mind that she could not forgive herself. At last, when she decides to marry the man her conscience forbids doing so. Finally, realising that her actions may hurt her parents and society she becomes indecisive. Saudamini requests her lover to return back and commits suicide by drowning herself into the river. The power of patriarchy is so dominating where one is only

taught to follow its commands. Resistance and freedom of thought is not a part of this institution. In this system, especially the girl children are more dominated by the parents. They are only taught to be passive. Further, their voices are not heard when they grow matured enough. They are silenced by either patriarchy or tradition. Sex and gender together play an influential role in pushing the cause of feminism. As in her seminal text *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir states that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman", the body is only a passive receiver of the cultural expression and gender thereby is a social construct (Beauvoir, 301).

In the novel, Sashiprova and Mrinalani are two other significant comparable characters to Saudamini. Sashiprova is a young widow who stays with priest Alamgarhi. She helps him in his temple duties. Many helpless women are engaged in such activities; they are assured that someone will take care of them after these priests' death. These poor women are victimised in the ashrams by the priests. They are exploited by giving false promises and engaging in caretaking and housekeeping works. Moreover, in most of the cases, they are sexually exploited. Sashiprova's father lost his life during the partition of India. Her mother too died in a famine. She had no other choice than coming to the Brindavan. The structure of the society is so nastily built where even a poor and helpless woman is not supported. In a patriarchal tradition, a widow has no place to live. She is only an ill omen in the eyes of society. On the other side, Mrinalani accompanies her parents to Brindavan for the rest of their lives. Mrinalani along with her mother becomes another prey of patriarchy and tradition. It is because of her father's disgraceful and scandalous acts in the past, they are about to suffer now. She speaks, "You see this blind old man? He is responsible for ruining our prosperous and happy lives. He left us to starve while he squandered all the money on liquor. And now, see how liquor has taken its revenge and kicked him down into this life!" (Bhattacharyya, 141). The author not only portrays the patriarchy but also displays how a certain class of men misuses power in a patriarchal society and destructs their own family. Since men are considered superior in a patriarchy, it is very disappointing that they can also participate in ill deeds. In these situations, women suffer much more than men do. Mrinalini and her mother become subjects of subalternity when they cannot leave their father and husband. The traditional and orthodox beliefs bring them to the ashram to suffer together. It is not only Thakur Sahib, but also an educated person like Dr. Roychoudhury also believes in holy dying. They believe that dying in Brindavan would bring salvation to them. Thousands of helpless old widows and women come to pass their life in Brindavan just because they are widows, old, poor and helpless. Secondly, a patriarchal society does not provide space for them. Because of this long maintained tradition, they accept that as their ill-fate. They feel like someone 'other' with a difference. These senses push them towards subalternity. Women in the Braj start aging. They think to die there for salvation but, who will perform their last rites? This question troubles them every moment. They keep on begging and collecting money for it.

The question of survival is very notable in the select text. On the other hand, poverty and hunger are two major social evils displayed in the select novel. In the poem, *Ode to a Whore*, written by Indira Goswami herself, reflects the two sides of women. To evade the pain of hunger and poverty, women choose to become whores. They cannot compromise anything with hunger. In the poem, hunger has compelled a whore to sell her body wherein the process she has to whip the body and drink own blood. After knowing about the whores, people call them sinners and curse for their sexual infidelities. It is hunger and poverty which can transform one from a human being to a devil. At the same time, it can also make one a silent subaltern being. Poverty and hunger are very evident in *The Blue-necked God*. Goswami has portrayed the submissive state and subalternity of the characters very painstakingly. It is hunger

and poverty which pushes women to face tragic circumstances. In a patriarchal society, a woman is always considered a secondary subject. There is no place for them to have any share of property either at her maternal home or at her in-law's home. Technically, they gain no share of the property from both sides. They have to remain economically dependent on male members of the family. So, when someone's husband dies, economically a widow becomes unstable eventually. Afterward, no one supports her except her own family, which is also very rarely seen in society. In the select novel, thousands and thousands of young, as well as old radheshyamis, suffer from poverty and hunger. They are being victimised by men in many epitomes who are so-called priest, Seth, paanda, swami, baba, sadhu, goonda, etc. Since the radheshyamis have nothing for their survival, they engage themselves in begging activities. Some of them have to stay with the priest as their helpers and caretakers. Many of them choose to be religious song-performers in the temples and holy festivals of Brindavan. The most painful thing is selling their bodies to men. Goswami mentions in the novel,

"Like butchers examining animals before buying them, the young men would make these young widows strip off their clothes in order to examine their bodies thoroughly and make sure that they were without any blemishes. They had found those unfortunates who had been widowed at a very early age and whose only immediate problem was hunger because they had not eaten anything for days" (Bhattacharyya, 8).

No one wants to sell their body but it is hunger which makes them sell. It is generally said that 'a loss of identity is equal to death' but what if one is about to die digesting hunger? The question of survival becomes more eloquent than the answer to identity. Since life is greater than anything. Identity is only purposeful when one is alive. The ache of hunger pushes them to the class of 'other'. Although they want to speak for themselves, they cannot speak. Poverty brings them to the street and hunger causes wounds to their bodies. Poor radheshyamis are bound to beg for clothes and foods in religious offerings and festivals. They have no other ways than begging and selling their bodies for survival. "Soon all the other women, the starving radheshyamis, also started shouting, "Give us more. Why do you fear that Govindji's store will be finished?" (Bhattacharyya, 58). These radheshyamis do not get enough food to eat and starve for many days. They have the fortune to eat satisfyingly only occasionally, in the holy festivals. It is only because of poverty and hunger a young widow like Sashiprova starts spending her days with a priest called Alamgarhi. She is used as a slave by the priest, but she is graced with her two-time meal at least. Sashiprova is ready to sacrifice everything at the cost of compromising with hunger pain. On the other hand, Mrinalani with her family arrives in the Brindavan in a way to escape from poverty. Her father had sold all the inheritances except a temple remaining in the Brindavan. He too sales that temple and dies in Braj. Mrinalani has no other way out to survive, except becoming a radheshyami. When no one stands with someone, silence remains the only option, letting the river of life to just flow on and on towards the flow of time and finally to the ocean of death.

To conclude, in the select text women are regularly pushed into the class of 'subalterns' by various traditional, societal and institutional forces. They are treated as 'other' by positioning them on the basis of tradition, caste, patriarchy, gender, class, etc. These separations of women done in various layers turn them to be the 'other'. Apart from the above-discussed factors, various other interrelated factors push women to become 'subalterns'. Therefore, they are suppressed and victimised at the same time remain silent.

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