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CASTE AS A SOCIAL STIGMA IN INDIRA GOSWAMI'S "SANSKAAR": A WOMAN'S PREDICAMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Examining Indira Goswami's story "Sanskara" or "The Offspring" this paper will explore the disabilities and functionalities of region specific caste system in India. As it analyses the complex nuances of marginality in terms of caste, it also reveals the complementary nature of caste and class in certain cases as Indira Goswami has demonstrated, that leads to unique identity formation at multiple levels. In this Story Damayanti's course of actions heightens the fact how the age old discourse of 'caste-purity' and 'othering' of people on the basis of the difference in creed/religion continues to flow furtively through our blood and how difficult it is to be liberated from inside even though there is exterior freedom.

In this story Indira Goswami has depicted how the inheritance of the traditional canon crushes the souls with rigid dogma and the way the inhuman rituals that have survived into our times, displace the life blood of healthy emotions with bitterness and poignant pathos. This article would be focusing on how Goswami's Damayanti ironically reverses the signs of the semiotics of the patriarchy and the caste system to produce a sense of bewilderment, incomprehension and scare among the male hegemonic power structures.

Key words: Patriarchy, caste system, marginality, deconstruction, strategies, socio-political power structure.

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INTRODUCTION

Indira Goswami, also known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami, is a celebrity in Modern Assamese literature. Her various roles: as a writer of socially relevant fiction in her native Assamese, for which she has been honored with, besides many other national and international awards, Principal Prince Claus Award, Tulsi Award, Sahitya Akademi Award and Jananpith Award. Her priorities lie clearly with the marginalized sections of Indian society, whether they have been marginalized by the power structures of patriarchy or by the inhuman injustices meted out by people in power to their own

countrymen. Her sympathy embraces even animals, the mute, hapless victims of a bizarre social custom, who are placed at the centre in her writings. In her works, she exposes the politics operating behind these marginalization and calls for affirmative action to redress the wrongs and create an egalitarian society in which all can breathe freely without discriminations on gender, class, race and other denominators of suppression. Malashri Lal has rightly pointed out that it will be unfair to limit the scope and range of her fiction by typifying her as a 'feminist' writer, she writes:

"The common thread in Indira Goswami's immensely diverse and rich oeuvre is the concern for women...Despite the complex interstices, I see no contradictions, and only a holistic expression of India's many challenges to women's empowerment and a gifted writer moulding them into creative forms." (www.indiragoswami.blogspot.com)

Indira Goswami's fictional world shows that she is one of the most imaginative practitioners of realistic fiction. Though her fictional landscape is mainly Assam and the characters are drawn habitually from the North-Eastern Assamese society, the novels and short stories do not suffer from parochialism. It is the treatment of the issues she handles in her narratives which give it a universal caste-Hindu Indian character and appeal. Indira's main concern is the plight of women and the oppressive gender practices of the patriarchal tradition which she portrays vividly. This article explores how Indira Goswami depicts the complex nuances of marginality in terms of Caste through her writings. While delving on Goswami's exploration of the identities, disabilities and functionalities of region specific caste system, attention is also drawn to specific cases where both class and caste become complementary and intertwine closely to make up unique social identities.

Cast as a social stigma

Caste in the Indian context is always very complicated and distinct as it functions diversely among different groups in different regions. Like its theory of origin, caste, is definitely plural in nature in India for it depends broadly on local aspects. While discussing the origin of caste, A.P. Barnabas and Subhash C. Mehta in *Caste in Changing India* aptly comment on the plurality of the caste theories:

"...there are also so many theories on the origin of the caste system in India – some seeking its roots primarily in the racial and ethnic differences, some in the socio-spiritual evolution of the tribal characteristics of India in ancient times, some only in the occupational differences, some merely in the spiritual beliefs of the pre-Aryans and Aryans in India and so forth. It is likely that several factors working

jointly led in course of time to the emergence of the Indian caste system, its social, economic and ideological factors being specially influenced by several factors." (10)

More importance is generally given to caste as the primary agent in defining identities within Indian communities and the role of class structure within them is almost always ignored. In certain cases, as Goswami shows, class and caste combine to form more complex identities at multiple levels. She gives frequent descriptions of incidents where the upper castes' obsession with their purity dehumanizes and stigmatizes the lower castes. In her narratives, the upper castes are shown in perpetual fear of being contaminated and pundits, along with other Brahmins belonging to higher castes, make conscious efforts to maintain their purity by avoiding the touch of lower caste people.

Goswami portrays caste discrimination and the concept of pollution and untouchability as deplorable social malaises; such prejudices slide further and reach an extreme point in her short story "Sanksaar" or "The Offspring" as it is titled in English. In this story Damayanti, a high caste young widow with her small daughter, finding herself unable to make both ends meet, stooped down to selling her body as a means of her livelihood. Although she belongs to the Bangara Brahmins, known for their austerity and high caste standing, she resorts to prostitution to get food for herself and for her daughters after her widowhood. Widows and victims of rape and seduction have nowhere to go except take refuge in prostitution. Krishnakanth, the hard up, wily old priest, to augment his dwindling earnings, dangles Damayanti as bait, in front of Pitambar mahajan, a low caste, rich man, advanced in age, who is at his wits end worrying about his issue less barren existence. Krishnakanth suggests that Pitambar can realize his dream of having an offspring in Damayanti because there is no doubt about her fecundity—"yes, this time it is absolutely pucca!", whispering that she has already buried four fetuses, evil fruits of her misdeeds. The stark reasons for which women are taken advantage of can be summed up in Simone de Beauvoir's words:

"In truth woman has not been socially emancipated through man's need-sexual desire and the desire for offspring- which makes the male dependent for satisfaction upon the female." (*The Second Sex*, 1989: xxvi)

The story depicts how young defenseless women are coerced into giving in, hunger, lack of education and economic independence, being the prime reasons for their exploitation. In the case of Damayanti, though at first she does not agree to the beastly proposal because of Pitambar's caste which is clearly indicated by her choice epithets of *pariah* and *vermin*. To the priest Krishnakanth, the emissary of Pitambar, Damayanti reacted initially in a hardnosed manner:

"That pariah! How dare he send this proposal to me! Doesn't he know that I am the *jajamani* Brahmin caste and he, the vermin, is a low-caste *mahajan*?"

Goswami here reveals the false pride and the ego of the widow regarding her superior caste standing. She can stoop low to prostitute herself, but she still thinks that she is superior to the so called lower caste people. However, she ultimately asked pitambar to meet her on the full moon night, at her *dhekhhal*. But instead of marrying him, she accepted money and offered herself in return. Prostitution has been practiced for ages and patriarchy invented newer methods to give a veneer of respect so that men, who could afford, have fun and the prostitutes never complain about their sexual exploitation. In the story, the weak point of Damayanti is her children for whose sake she buries her conscience and embraces a life considered immoral. Later on when the priest brutally breaks down her defenses- 'suddenly she started crying': "what could I do? I had to live, they take advantage of my helplessness, what can I do?" she is at the end of her tether and realizes that there is nowhere else to go. No one hears her plaintive cry for help, and her voice goes unheard. Damayanti is a puppet of her circumstances. She could not marry Pitambar, even if she wanted to, because of the rigid caste system. She was doomed to a life of filth, a victim of oppressive power relations of patriarchy. Forbes argues that much of the prostitution throughout the

world could be traced to poverty and lack of alternatives for women but in India particular customs like child marriages, the inauspiciousness of widowhood, and 'our general attitude towards girls' made the situations worse. The helplessness and commonality of the experience of Hindu widows became a metonymy for the condition of Indian women in general.

Another instance of where the unjust social system is unveiled is the portrayal of Pitambar's bedridden wife. With her burning eyes, accusing stare, and diseased body, she stands out as a signpost of mute protest; a metaphor for all that is decadent in society. Instead of sympathy, she bears the brunt of her husband's wrath for being barren- "you barren bitch!". Here Goswami penetrates the crude and dark realities of the social system where a woman is nothing but the possessor of 'the womb'. She is valued because of her womb, which is her greatest asset and without which she is nothing but a beast of burden. To quote Simone de Beauvoir, "woman? She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female- this word is sufficient to define her" (*The Second Sex*, 1989:3).

Damayanti's course of action heightens the fact how the age old discourse of 'caste-purity' and 'othering' of people on the basis of the difference in creed/caste/religion continue to flow furtively through our blood and how difficult it is to be liberated from inside even though there is exterior freedom. Damayanti is giving herself to Pitambar for money; she is still aware of her superior caste standing and feels "unclean" after every encounter with Pitambar. The concept of being polluted drives her all the time and whenever they copulate, Damayanti will invariably take a bath to get purified from the touch of a lower caste man. Damayanti's egotistical sense of superiority is further demonstrated as she becomes pregnant. When Krishnakanth finds this out he immediately informs Pitambar about it. Hearing the news, Pitambar is filled with joy for he thinks that she might gratify him with a son. Pitambar is shattered when on a dismal rainy night Krishnakanth gives him the inauspicious news that his son is not destined to born- "Alas! She has destroyed your child!" he goes berserk, and one night when Damayanti hears the

sound of digging in the bamboo grove behind her house, she is overcome with horror and calls out to Pitambar to stop unearthing the buried male fetus which is beyond recognition. His frenzied reply is that he would still like to hold and have a feel of it – *his* flesh and blood! To his utter surprise Damayanti made a candid confession:

“Yes it was a boy ...I’ve myself induced this abortion. It did not happen of its own accord, it is enjoined upon me to earn a living even if I have to sell my body for it. But I belong to a high caste which is superior to yours. I can sleep with a man of a lower caste than mine. But I can’t marry him to give him a child.”

Damayanti conceives a child by him but refuses to let it be born. She aborts the fetus to keep her caste purity intact. The power of Goswami’s story lies in its recognition that women are complexly located at the juncture of gender, caste, and community. This often renders their acts of resistance deeply problematic. The contraction in Damayanti’s action is that while it challenges gender hierarchy, it seems to reinforce caste inequality. In Damayanti, we see how the preliminary crusading Indian woman eventually surrenders before the habitual socio-religious shibboleths and becomes victims of the casteist cum racist social order. Here we find the effective and empowering writing craftsmanship in Goswami’s narratives. It is difficult to find many in Assam or elsewhere in the world, which have been able to transcend their own subjectivity as women to treat both their male and female characters with equal love and understanding. How many writers can empathize with a rich childless man’s desperation for an offspring while at the same time comprehending his Brahmin concubine’s aversion to carrying a low caste man’s child? She drew all her characters, male or female, with equal insight and involvement.

In her writings Goswami exposes, the caste discrimination and untouchability go beyond simple purification rituals and become rigid in many cases that result in a sharp decline in basic human compassion. While her portrayals of lower castes show their debilitating social status and suffering, her depictions of upper castes, especially the

Brahmins are interspersed with satire and anger. Krishnakanth, the cunning and manipulator Brahmin priest in the story, loses his priestly duties and powers to younger Brahmins as he gets older. His needs have driven him to Pitambar and he has no qualms in receiving money from “low caste” like Pitambar. He is also afraid of being polluted by low castes and strives to avoid Pitambar’s touch at any cost. After he proposes to Pitambar that he will arrange a meeting of him with Damayanti, as Pitambar “overwhelmed with gratitude” goes up to him “to grasp his hand”(18), Krishnakanth cringes back “to avoid his touch”. He is on his way to bathe the idol of Muralidhar Krishna in Gossain’s house and “if this man touched him, he would have to take a second bath” (*The Shadow* 18). The so called superior upper castes, like Krishnakanth, Goswami portrays them in general as opportunists, greedy, and full of vices, miles apart from the poor and hardworking lower castes. Their personal actions do not match with what they preach to others and hence, they turn out to be deceitful and cunning in the end.

Conclusion

The complexity of gendered resistance is very powerfully captured by Indira Goswami as Damayanti’s aborting her fetus to resist male hegemony in the name of maintenance, is actually their remonstrance against patriarchal forces and influence. If Damayanti is guilty of “the sin”, so are Pitambar and Krishnakanth. One should not forget the society with its rigid religious and ritualistic practices and social norms. Goswami’s writings strongly deal with resistance of women against the power that incarnates in different forms-patriarchy, the feudal set up, caste, class and gender ideologies and arrangements. Patriarchy is so deeply rooted in the Indian context and its soil that it is very difficult to study caste, class and gender in isolation. Goswami questions the rigidity of the caste system and shows its futility. While nothing could be more precious than a human life. In her stories she vehemently speaks in favor of gender equality and the right of women for a better treatment/education, which automatically empowers, emancipates and liberates them from

invisible bondage of power relations paving the way towards better living standards and a just society.

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