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Exploring the Concept Eternal Feminine in Sarojini Sahoo's *The Goddess in Exile*

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Abstract:

Eternal Feminine is a concept rendered to elevate women to the goddess status by extolling certain qualities that satisfy the needs and desires of the male-dominated society. The research paper focuses on the eminence of Sahoo in deconstructing the applied patriarchal framework in her novel *Goddess in Exile*. The core scrutiny of the paper is to elucidate the eternal feminine theory and its hidden patriarchal agendas. The research paper further endeavours to contradict the theory of eternal feminine with Simone de Beauvoir's idea of patriarchal domination exposed in "The Second Sex." Sahoo's novel illustrates on how even educated women in the 21st century become powerless to set herself free from oppression and subjugation. It is necessary to consider the immeasurable limits and submission set by the society for a woman to be praised and worshipped as a divine entity.

Keywords: Eternal feminine, second sex, oppression, subjugation, goddess, society, framework.

Introduction:

Literature is considered as the mirror of the society. Women writers believe that the representation of women in literature has changed in the course of time. However, according to Mridula Garg,

"There is greater concern with proving oneself on the right side of Feminist discourse than a compassionate account of both man and women, who dare to dissent from the opinion of the many. Superficially there is franker depiction of both sexuality and general independence of women. But female sexuality has got reduced to freedom of the body, including the outspoken inconsequential depiction of body functions such as menstruation, sexual desires and sexual assault. The real independence which stems from taking decisions without deference to the canons of discourses, religious, social, patriarchal or feminist is missing".(Shukla)

Women writings are prejudiced to be descriptions and elucidations of female physical and sensual issues. Anita Nair, a writer, senses that nothing has changed in the terms of mentality, "That a woman could live a fulfilled life on her own terms was a concept writers seemed unable to conceive or unwilling to explore." This is because Nair explains that every time the author provides power for the woman character to make decisions that overlooks the constructed societal norms it agitates the readers.

Sarojini Sahoo is acclaimed as the renowned trendsetter in postmodern in Odia literature. Her writing enunciates the femininity of women as a whole. She explores the concept of womanhood attributing independence to express their feminine eminences. Sahoo handles fiction as a tool to explicate the sensibilities and feelings of woman. Sahoo says "I think, there are some feelings, an intricate mental agony and a complexity which a man cannot possibly feel, and these should be discussed in our fictions." Her fiction often endeavours feminine feelings such as constrains during adolescence or pregnancy, fear factors such as rape or being doomed by the society. Suman Mahapatra traces Sahoo's writing as a faithful portrayal of deplorable distress and victimisation of the woman, a psycho-social reading of her suffering and torture. She believes that according to Sahoo woman is a respectable individual of God's creation with her own free will and choice, her own freedom and fascination, her passion and sexuality. Sahoo encapsulates in her writing that women are not to be subjugated or oppressed but to be set to express their sense and sensuality for it is the basic component of healthy atmosphere.

Suman Mahapatra, the translator of the novel *The Goddess in Exile* exclaims that Sahoo is painfully aware of the suffering and torture of the 'second sex' in a male dominated society. According to Sarojini Sahoo femininity is a separate unfathomable realm very unique

and different from that of the masculinity. She believes that womanhood is distinctive in its horizon and creation. Therefore the power in both exercising and expressing it lies within the rights of a woman. Researchers and critics have found Sahoo's thoughts and believes to be in parallel with the feminist ideas and theories of Simone de Beauvoir. Sahoo however does not accept the concept of Simone de Beauvoir's adaptation of the idea of 'other' from the Hegelian theory which explores the fact of how women are considered as man's other and the subsequent oppression of women on its account. Sahoo believes that man and woman are separate creations who equally surpass one another in certain criteria. But Sahoo agrees with the Simone's disagreement with the 'Eternal Feminine.' The Eternal feminine concept encapsulates the biological, historical and psychoanalytical aspects of a woman by incorporating them into multiple myths. The woman is raised to a goddess stature and thus results in rejection of claiming individuality and a self-identity of their own. Sahoo describes that for the reckoning of their Eternal Feminine women are assumed to surrender their claims to perfection and authentic subjectivity by a progressively more rigorous acceptance of the "passive" and "alienated" role. They are sealed to a peculiar framework set by the patriarchy that chokes their original personality.

Goddess in Exile

"Goddess in Exile" is a translation of the original Odia novel Bishad Iswari (A Depressed Goddess) by Sarojini Sahoo. The fiction is later translated in English by Prof. Suman Mahapatra. The novel is an embodiment of patriarchal oppression, domestic violence and the consequent mental agony suffered by the protagonist Harsha. She is given in marriage at the age of 19. The marriage occurred against Harsha's bidding due to the constant force and persuasion of her grandfather. Harsha belongs to an orthodox Brahmin family of Puri. She was an eminent student whose dream encompassed of becoming an IAS. However, not only her dream of becoming an IAS was shattered but also her mere yearning to live a descent and peaceful life was destroyed after her marriage to a successful heart surgeon who is an alcoholic and masochistic in nature. Harsha was constantly abused by her husband every night. Whenever she declined to concede to his wishes she was thrashed brutally, leaving her in her pool of blood. When Harsha realized that the pain was too much to bare both physically and mentally she decided to desert him. She enrolls in Journalism course in Delhi University where she meets Alberto, a professor in Philosophy. Alberto is a Portuguese and has deep respect and curiosity towards ancient Indian history and heritage. They play together a Portuguese game of question and answer that eventually draws them together. Harsha

becomes thrilled to have Alberto as her lover. She senses happiness within her after a long time. She expects a life filled with love which is invigorating and self-sustaining. She accompanies Alberto to Rishikesh where they consummate their love. After having a physical relationship, Alberto who claims to be a Buddhist feels guilty. He believes that the consummation has violated the religious code of self-discipline.

Harsha's husband on the other hand comes to Delhi in search of her. After finding her, he takes her to a hotel and abuses her sexually. As usual regardless of Harsha's consent and desire, he brutally claims himself as the owner of her body and tears her apart. She escapes from the 'beast's' grasp and reaches Alberto's place in search of shelter. There she finds Alberto with a Benares girl whom he adores for her knowledge about the old city and her involvement with the Indian philosophy. Torn apart with disappointment, betrayal, jealousy and pain, Harsha reaches her hostel room where she finds her husband sitting with bloodshot eyes on a cot to exert his ownership over her. Sahoo provides an open-ended conclusion. It is in Harsha's decision either to lean on Alberto for a relief from the sexual abuse or to succumb a life-long brutal, non-consensual desires and wishes of her husband.

Eternal Feminine:

Eternal feminine is a societal construction that idealizes the psychological, physical perspectives and aspects of women in society. It emphasizes the concept of 'gender essentialism' where it states that man and woman are of different vital 'essence' that can never be reformed either by time or environment. The ideology became dominant in the 19th century where women are romanticized as angelic figures who are responsible for the spiritual and logic attainment of men in society. The virtues that are compelled in the essentially feminine are "modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, politeness". Goethe in his tragic play 'Faust' proposes the concept of eternal feminine which is considered as the major point in the play's conclusion. He regarded woman as the mark of purity in contrast to masculine action. Since Goethe was an ardent believer in the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato accompanied with his apparent devotion toward Greek literatures enhances his eternal feminine concept. According to Greek mythology both child birth and the care of dead are done by women. Therefore eternal feminine encompasses the idea that women possess the power to redeem and serve as a moral guardian. The virtues of woman are regarded to be concealed whereas for men it was public. Researcher Elena P.O'Brien comments,

“The most important quality of the Eternal Feminine is its relation to immortality. As the fruitful and abundant Mother Earth, it has the propagation of life as its main function. Like the Eros of Plato, it preserves life in two ways: by means of sexual love and by communicating to the people the higher realm of perfect Beauty and Wisdom, thus allowing the mortals to reach the realm of the divine.”(O’Brien 23)

Eternal feminine lifts the ordinary human stature of women to an extraordinary celestial level where their virtues are constructed and formulated to gratify and enhance the actions of men to attain spiritual aspiration. Simone de Beauvoir considered “eternal feminine” as nothing but a careful construction of patriarchal myth that portray women as a passive "erotic, birthing or nurturing body" who are subtly eliminated from the role of a subject who experiences and acts.

Eternal Feminine in “Goddess of exile”:

In the novel ‘Goddess in Exile’ Sarojini Sahoo adopts the Hindu Mythology imposed eternal feminine. The author in the novel frequently quotes the concept of womanhood framed by *Manismirita*

“A maid in household chore, a minister to advice, a mother in feeding, a fairy like Rambha on the bed, an earth in forgiving” mark the standards of an ideal wife.(Sahoo 40)

When a woman defies any one of the above characteristic she is ordained for punishment from her husband. The society however stands in support for the male. When Harsha complains about the brutal and sadistic advances of her husband to her family she is mocked and scorned. As Harsha pours her heart to her only best friend Sarita:

“There is a terrible pain in the inmost corner of my heart. I feel the man does not find any difference between me and a prostitute.” (Sahoo 96)

Sarita disregards the issue by shifting the subject and turns a deaf ear to the agony of Harsha. When Harsha further states her position in her husband’s house:

“I have spent so many sleepless nights, waiting... for the creaking of the gate... calling bell to ring... sound of the latches of the door. (Sahoo 100)

Sarita sympathizes not with Harsha’s situation but rather with Harsha’s husband:

“I can't believe you. The doctors have to attend emergency duties... they cannot evade their responsibility...” (Sahoo 100)

Harsha is expected to conceal her feelings and carry on her duties towards fulfilling her husband's needs and sensual desires. The family as a whole disregards her pain. Even Harsha's father who could understand her feelings remains powerless to redeem her rather sends her back to her husband with her in-laws. For it is considered to be “The destiny of a woman.” As the construction framed by the patriarchy, eternal feminine provides the agenda of being a woman. Even when the man fails to behave as a human or reliable support, the woman is expected, forced to discharge her duties to him with complete submission. For it is the destiny of a woman in the society. As Harsha probes over the brutalities exposed by the husband her younger aunt suggests, “The matter should be confined to our place, let it not spread to your in-law's house.” (Sahoo 104) Harsha's whole household is worried about the patriarchal framed social conventions than that of the pain and agony experienced by her. Simone de Beauvoir in her “Second Sex” explains that women have been treated inferior to men throughout the history based on 3 reasons: 1. Society teaches women to fulfil male's needs and (no matter what) exist in relation to man, 2. To follow the external clues, to seek validation of their worth, 3. Female have historically had far fewer legal rights and less public influence.(Beauvoir 62) Together they are doomed to be eternally vulnerable and solely dependent on the male in the family. As Harsha elicits the non-consensual sexual advances of her husband, she is mocked by her own best friend Sarita who explains that the mere agony and sorrow experienced by Harsha is the sole desire of married girls. Every action of woman is set to be pleasing the man in the society.

Simone de Beauvoir states that even when a woman stays unmarried, she'll still be held to the male standards. Harsha's love affair with Alberto which she considered to be true, pure, and divine, for him it was a sin based on his religious norms. When Harsha longs for a physical adoration towards her by Alberto, he confesses that he is more attracted towards her intelligence than towards her physical attributes. It is the man in the relationship who decides what pleases him by convincingly disregarding the opinion or the psychological expectations of a woman. Simone de Beauvoir compares the livelihood of a woman to a doll. Harsha was an intelligent doll to Alberto. She listens, comforts and passes her knowledge to him according to his desire. At the end, Alberto replaces Harsha with a Benares girl whom he considers to be acquainted with more knowledge compared to Harsha. As Sahoo illustrates the difference between the masochistic husband and intelligent Alberto:

“...there was not much difference between that man and Alberto. Harsha was a plate of rice for that man which he would devour like a cow, and for Alberto, she was a book in which he would underline every page of it. Both will use her in their own ways. The truth remained that she was used. The man would go leaving out the plate after eating and Alberto would throw away the book.”
(Sahoo 160)

The difference between Alberto and masochistic husband is a very thin line: the first abuses her intellectually the later exploits her physically. Harsha's yearn for a peaceful life remains unfulfilled. She was constantly subjugated to sexual exploitation by her husband. When she confesses to her family, Harsha is expected to fulfil her duties set by the patriarchy. Even her in-laws who are aware of her husband's alcohol addiction blames Harsha for not possessing the power to transform their son. Consequently, Harsha's parents are also scorned by her in-laws, blaming her responsible for the degradation of the family's reputation in the society. Harsha is expected to gulp her pain to satisfy the norms set by the society for a woman. As Simone de Beauvoir points that the concept feminine is not an inherent property. Rather it is a framework that has been learned through socialisation.

Conclusion:

The novel Goddess in Exile as mentioned is a translation of Sahoo's Odia novel Bishad Iswari (A Depressed Goddess). In Orissa Goddess Lakshmi is adored and worshipped as the symbol of wealth and prosperity. She is represented in the Odia culture as an aspiration to be fiercely independent wife, mother, even as being an embodiment of femininity. Prof. Annapurna Devi Pandey in her research on “Women and Religion in the Indian Diaspora” comments that the Goddess served as a role model in the Hindu Patriarchal system. As she points out:

“Goddess Lakshmi has proved her independence in the role of a wife and when she was chastised by her husband for her independence and autonomy, instead of walking out of marriage, she taught her husband, Jagannath, how to do everything right in his role as a husband, the lord of the family and society.”(Devi 254)

Sarojini Sahoo paints a different goddess in her novel. The goddess in her novel is brutally raped by her own husband, intellectually exploited by her trusted lover, blamed and branded an incapable woman by her in-laws. The Goddess Lakshmi in the Odia culture is

admired, celebrated, and worshipped for her fierce strength in walking out from a marriage which curbs her independence and autonomy. The Goddess of Sahoo however is oppressed, ridiculed and scorned by the same society for her decision to forsake a relationship that considers her as a mere sex-gratifier. As Simone de Beauvoir emphasizes that “one is not born a woman, but becomes one.” A woman is considered and accepted as a woman only when she fits to the well-constructed patriarchal norms that treats womanhood inferior by keeping the men superior in power. Sarojini Sahoo elucidates on how cultural and societal framework ignores the pain and agony of womanhood. The society which acclaims and worships a human as goddess, thrashes her down when she refuses to fit into the patriarchal framework. Sahoo rips the true concept of oppression hidden in the theory of eternal feminine.

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