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Women as Invisible Victims of Inhumanity and Male Power Structure in Indira Goswami's *The Empty Chest* and *A City in its Nakedness*

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Abstract:

Indira Goswami is a multifarious writer who has written about the oppressed and marginalised people of the society. She has written about women being made victims and about their sufferings and pains. Women have always been considered the “second sex”, the “other”, but the current age of materialism along with the patriarchal system has made women more vulnerable than ever. The male chauvinists view them as objects to be used or as source of entertainment. In this paper I would deal with two of the short stories of Indira Goswami, namely *The Empty Chest* and *A City in its Nakedness*, and try to analyse and bring out instances where women become victims or rather invisible victims of patriarchy and the inhumanity of the present age. And thus, expose the politics behind the exploitation of women and the ugly game of patriarchy.

Keywords: Women, Victims, Inhumanity, Patriarchy, Society, Materialism.

“Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to him; she is not considered as autonomous being... and she is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called ‘the sex’,... She determines and differentiates herself in relation to man, and he does not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.” (De Beauvoir, 5-6)

Woman has always been the “second sex”, the “other” to the male-dominated society. Since time immemorial women have been subjugated and suppressed and their fundamental rights have been curtailed, not only to make men more domineering but also to demean the dignity of women. And it is through restraining women that this perpetuation of patriarchy goes on. The outcome of which is women end up either being confined within the four walls of their homes or if they try to break free, their feathers are cut.

In spite of women's emancipation and empowerment, the present age of diminishing humanity and decaying social values, has made the woman a victim of masculine cruelty. No matter how much hue and cry is being made about the equal rights for women, or to bring them to the centre to be considered as humans first, the age-old patriarchal set-up has already fashioned the mind-set of people which cannot be changed completely. From young boys to old men, every male is a part and player of this patriarchal set-up, as their very upbringing is moulded by it. Children are taught and brought-up with the belief that a female is submissive, weak and is to be seen in relation to the male members of her family.

Indira Goswami is a renowned Assamese writer, poet, professor and a scholar. She is a celebrated writer, whose works are being translated into various other languages. She has written on topics which were untouched before. Her writings are about the oppressed and the marginalized people of the Indian society. She has voiced their plight and the insensitivity of people towards them in her works, in order to sensitize people and to bring about a change in their status. Her works exude true compassion and empathy for the people who are at the periphery. "Her writing is like a stifled cry of pain at man's inhumanity to man, which modulates sometimes into quiet bitterness and at times into poignant pathos." (Hiren Gohain, *Ineffable Mystery*, p-140) Her writings display a genuine concern for women and present the nuances of their victimisation. She writes about their thwarted desires and ruined hopes, about their gashes and muffled cries with a deep understanding. As a silent observer she has observed the discriminations meted out towards women. But when she writes, she writes as loud as to be heard by everyone. As Malashri Lal has rightly put, "The common thread in Indira Goswami's immensely diverse and rich oeuvre is the concern for women. In her person and in her work this is echoed multifariously." (www.indiragoswami.blogspot.com)

The two short stories which are dealt with in this paper, *The Empty Chest* and *A City in its Nakedness*, show women as disguised or invisible victims of the male power structure and the inhumanity of this materialistic age. In this age of complete acquisitiveness people have become more self-centred and are hankering after the material things of life. There's no place for feelings and emotions and one's profit is one's only goal. This age of decaying humanity has resulted in a more hostile environment for women. Men look on women as some sort of entertainment, without any concern for their feelings and emotions. And this has been rightly presented in all the short stories of Indira Goswami. The stories have a stark reality in them which shocks everyone. The protagonists of all the stories are not subjected to any physical harm or abuse but are made inactive watchers of their own mental agony.

Toradoi, the protagonist of *The Empty Chest*, is one such instance. She is the victim of declining humanity as well as of male power structure. She is triply marginalised: first as a woman, second as a low born and third as a poor. She lives on the “fringes of the cremation ground under the shrine of Kamakhya” which symbolizes her being on the fringe of the society. Her drunkard husband is in jail and she is left alone in penury to look after her two children and eke out her days. Haibor, the fire-wood seller, wants to take advantage of her loneliness and helplessness. Haibor is an agent of patriarchy who shows no sympathy or remorse in asking her to keep her “door open at night”. He wants to rob her off of her dignity and that is his sole condition to help her out of the sad condition in which she is.

We see Toradoi “inextricably entangled” with a black wooden box, wherein she lies “revelling in the incomparable pleasure she felt.” But her brother, Someswar, comes to visit her and deprive her of “something precious’ which she had managed to salvage “from what had once been”. His inhumanity is shown in the way he comes “prepared” to snatch away the only source of relief from her and throws the bundle of wedding cards in Toradoi’s face. We also discover that he had not visited her when her husband was taken to jail or even after that. Someswar’s selfishness is further hinted upon when he says that his trip would be worthwhile if he could make some money by catching Haibor or the prostitute in the locality.

In their conversation we come to know that Toradoi had become the victim of this male dominated society and the so-called caste system. She was deeply in love with a man from higher rank, who claimed that he too loved her and vowed to marry her. But he could not marry her as she was from a lower caste and Toradoi was forced to marry another man. But her desires and passion for him do not die. We see the outburst of her suppressed desires for him in the way she caresses the coffin box. It’s the same box in which her lover’s, Saru Bopa’s, dead body was kept. She feels connected to him when she touches the box or lies in it. Her past memories come alive and her desires begin to surface once again.

But all her sweet memories and notion of love shatter at once when she comes to know about the impending marriage of her lover. Toradoi was fooled and betrayed by him. Her brother says, “You are still as much of an idiot now as you were when you gave yourself completely to the Thakur's son.” (36) All his promises of love and marriage were false and hollow. While she had hold fast to her love for him, he was on his way to marry someone else.

The story is a satire on the present society, wherein a boy fools a girl in love and gets what he wants and a brother, who cares more about his own monetary gain rather than about his sister's sufferings. No one understands the agony of Toradoi, who has to deal with poverty, feed her children and suppress all her physical and emotional desires for the one whom she passionately desired. The title of the story *The Empty Chest* is symbolic. At the beginning Toradoi's heart is full of love for her lover. But when she comes to know the truth she is left with no feelings for him. Her heart becomes as empty as the box.

The story reveals how women are forced to succumb to hunger and hardships. In "Woman's Situation and Character," in *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir claims that a woman's situation is *not* the result of her character, but that her character is a result of her situation. This, we can see at the end of *The Empty Chest* also. The reality of her lover comes as a crushing blow to her. With the mental agony of being cheated, bereft of love and emotions, she surrenders before the hardships of life. Toradoi gives up all her hopes and thinks only about the wellbeing of her children, when she goes out in the morning to see if Haibor is still waiting for the door to be opened and let inside. And here she becomes the invisible victim of inhumanity and the male power structure.

The story *A City in its Nakedness* shows the nakedness of the present society. De Beauvoir has pointed out in *The Second Sex* that the bourgeois woman performs three major functions: wife, mother and entertainer. In *A City in its Nakedness*, Urmila is seen doing the same at different levels. First, she performs the function of a wife for her husband who leaves her for another woman. By taking Jagannath inside her home to educate him, she in a way tries to be the mother, only to be brutally judged by him. Finally, she acts as an entertainer for Rupachandra, Professor Thakur and Jasowant, who come to visit her only to forget their own torments and problems of life, without thinking of her's. Urmila becomes the victim of these agents of patriarchy, who have used or are using her for their own benefits.

The word "Nakedness" in the title has different levels of significance. Literally it means "the state of being without clothing or covering". In this story, the word signifies the nakedness of society: the society, in the state of being without shame, without conscience, without sympathy or concern for others. It is this nakedness of society which shows no kind of remorse on its cruelty. And Urmila becomes the victim of this cruelty.

The lost and forlorn Urmila spends time with her friends, Rupachandra and Thakur, in order to shorn off her biting loneliness. But these two men are always on a look out to be left

alone with Urmila to spend a quality time with her. They see her as a source of entertainment that can make them forget their torments of life, without giving a single thought on her sufferings. The fact that her husband has left her and she is alone makes her more vulnerable to exploitation. Being a single woman in India is a stigma even today. People unnecessarily give different tags to single women and think of them as having low moral standards. This becomes clear when Jagannath angrily says to Urmila, “Do you know that the shopkeepers down there speak badly about you?” (158) Both the friends of Urmila visit her and talk of all the unimportant things for hours at night, unwilling to leave her place. They think of her as someone easily available to talk, thus entertained and forget their worries. At one occasion Urmila finds them as if they are “two hostile vultures sitting waiting for her- as though she was a lump of raw, naked flesh!” (156)

Another instance where Goswami unveils the unjust game of patriarchy is the portrayal of Jasowant. Jasowant, the man at whom Urmila looks for starting her devastated life anew, turns out to be the cruellest one among the three. During their two years of friendship, both Urmila and Jasowant develop feelings for each other. But as Jasowant already had the responsibility of marrying off his two sisters, he steps back from marrying her and they end seeing each other. Her suppressed yearnings and likeness for Jasowant come alive when at one occasion he visits her. There she wants to hear from Jasowant that he too cannot live without her, that he wants to marry her. This is voiced in her words, “So,” she said, “Everything is clear now, isn’t it? No matter how educated we women folk may be, no matter how empowered, our hearts yearn for protection, for support.” (152) This line also shows the deep conditioning of the patriarchal set-up in women. Even though she is educated and independent she yearns for a man’s love and support. She has for so long suppressed her desires and hopes but after seeing Jasowant once again, all her expectations are renewed, only to be shattered with his utter selfishness. He comes back to her not to marry her but only to have an illegitimate physical relationship.

The young innocent boy whom she brings home to educate and make a man out of him turns out to be the most unsympathetic. He judges Urmila and questions her character. He says,

My mother spends her time eating and drinking tea with the contractors at the Development block. She does that out of sheer hunger. But you have no hunger in your stomach. Why do you spend half the night with these wicked and selfish men?

Why? What difference is there between you and those 'bad' women living in the slums?

After he runs away, Urmila calls him once again at her home because she is "scared of her extreme loneliness." But his perverse cruelty comes at the end. All her expectations, notions of love and sympathy shatter with reality. In order to make money and kill Urmila's loneliness he brings Jasowant with him one rainy night and says,

...Now go inside and enjoy yourselves. You do not have to worry, I will sit here on the steps and guard you. Only, when your men friends leave, tell them to put some cash into the tin box I will be holding. I will always sit on these steps guarding you...

This is cruelty, rather inhumanity in all its starkness.

Goswami exposes the politics behind the exploitations of women in these stories and the different ways in which patriarchy works. Both the stories show women being used and suppressed by the agents of patriarchy. Goswami presents her readers with the stark reality in order to make them realise the urgent need for change. As Hiren Gohain has rightly said, "It is the lack of love in the people and the world as she has known them, shocking the reader into an awareness of the horror and pity of it." (140) Her works show how creeping inhumanity has made its place in people's hearts, making them more selfish and cruel. And women again have become the sufferers of this cruelty and are exploited in the age of women empowerment. Both the protagonists of *The Empty Chest* and *A City in its Nakedness* are true victims of male power structure and the inhumanity of the present age, wherein they are made passive onlookers of their own agony and exploitation.

Goswami writes in order to bring a change in the mental makeup of the society so that women can live a life of dignity, so that their position in the hierarchy of power structure could be elevated.

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