

**The Voice of the Voiceless: Representation of Mahasweta Devi and
Indira Goswami**

Jitamoni Phukan

Department of English, Bihpuria College, Bihpuria, Dist-Lakhimpur, Assam, India

Zip-784161 email-phukanjita101@gmail.com

Abstract

Gender is a social construct. The social construction of gender is a notion in feminism and sociology about the operation of gender and gender differences in our societies. This outlook of gender and gender differences have been source of study and research of many writers of India and the world to highlight the irony that lies in our societies. Gender equality, right to work for equal wages, right to equal access to health and education, equal political rights, minimizing discriminations prevailing in culture specific issues within Indian patriarchal society; such as inheritance laws and practice of Sati etc. are some other perennial aspects of Indian feminism. The present paper will try to highlight the voice of those voiceless, who has been leading their life amidst huge challenges in the path of living their own life. It will also try to establish different approaches of these two characters while defining their position in the face of the challenges they meet, to design their identity of that particular character.

Keywords: - Gender, feminism, discriminations, culture specific issues, patriarchal society, Indian feminism, identity



Introduction

Feminism, as an ideology is the outcome or off shoot of the movement which raised a voice for equality among all the people who have been divided on the basis of the gender, by birth. Gender is a social construct. The social construction of gender is a notion in feminism and sociology about the operation of gender and gender differences in societies. It is one of the important aspects of modernist and post modernist ideology in the hope of a better human society. According to this ideology, society and culture create gender roles in the society and these roles are prescribed as ideal for a person of that specific sex.

Whenever we talk about ‘voice’ there must be an ‘issue of identity’. When one’s identity comes under question, they have to raise a ‘voice’ to be heard by others in the society about the injustice taking place in that particular case. Twentieth century has witnessed the emergence of some prominent women writers in the sphere of literature in India. The image of women in fiction has undergone a change remarkably in the later part of twentieth century. And this is indeed a great sign, as literature is considered as the mirror of life. As in the western society, in the Indian society also feminism has undergone its changes in various phases of development. Like the feminist movement in all over the world, feminists in India seek to define, establish, and defend equal political, economic and social rights and equal opportunities for Indian women. Gender equality, right to work for equal wages, right to equal access to health and education, equal political rights, minimizing discriminations prevailing in culture specific issues within Indian patriarchal society; such as inheritance laws and practice of Sati etc. are some other perennial aspects of Indian feminism. The history of Indian feminism can be

divided into three phases: the first phase, beginning in the mid 19th century, initiated when male European colonists began to speak out against the social evils of Sati; the second phase, from 1915 to Indian Independence, when Gandhi incorporated women's movement into the Quit India movement and independent women's organizations began to emerge; and finally, the third phase, post-independence, which has focused on fair treatment of women at home after marriage, in the work place and right to political parity.

The present paper will try to highlight the voice of those voiceless, who has been leading their life amidst huge challenges in the path of living their own life. It will also try to establish different approaches of these two characters while defining their position in the face of the challenges they meet, to design their identity of that particular character. Mahasweta Devi and Indira Goswami are considered two leading writers in India who had contributed a lot to give a different shape to Indian feminist movement in the post independence era; covering a phase of 21st century. Both the writers are unique in their approach to deal with problems relating to injustice takes place with womenfolk in the society.

Objectives:

The objectives of the paper are-

- i) To get an overview of women writers in India.
- ii) To discuss the role of women's plight in the society in Indian context.
- iii) To discuss the contribution of the women writers to reshape the Indian society.
- iv) To explore the pen picture of the characters of Mahasweta Devi and Indira Goswami.

Methodology:

The study of the paper is based on secondary data collected from respective books, various sources like library works and internet sources. For the assessment of the status and identity of women, the Indian regional novelists' observations and sensibilities are studied minutely and the comprehensive picture of the women from the social, political, economic, religious and cultural angles are perceived and interpreted.

The methodology for this study is analytical, evaluative, interpretative and comparative as well. In order to state the place of women, the present study has taken into consideration the short stories of Indira Goswami and Mahasweta Devi respectively. The stories are studied by applying the comparative methodology with critical perspective.

Hypothesis:

The characters of Indira Goswami and Mahasweta Devi establish the 'voice' of the marginalized by their act of protest and helped to hear the unheard 'voices' since days unknown. As the 'voices' they represent are unique and different in their own manner, it stands as a taboo in Indian society.

Discussion of the topic:

Though the phases of Indian feminist movement emerges as a consequence of the waves that driven the west in the awakening of female folk in their journey towards an equal society, the Indian movement is quite different from the former and it arises some typical Indian problems of women folk. In a rigid patriarchal society, in India, woman had to fight for equal education, equal treatment of the society, equal wages, cultural, political, social and economic rights and most importantly against some social evils that prevail generation after generation. In our society, women are treated as an object or possession of some elder males in the society. When a girl child get married, the possession of the father is transferred to the other male, i.e., husband who is assigned not only to protect her, but also to treat her as any other possession he would like to. In such an Indian society, the reflection of two leading characters Dopdi and Damayanti; of two leading writers of the country, Mahasweta Devi and Indira Goswami respectively; stand as a protest against the male domination in our society.

Mahasweta Devi born on 14th January 1926 and died on 28th July 2016; is one of our foremost literary personalities, a prolific and best-selling author of Bengali short fiction and novels; a deeply political social activist who has worked for tribes and

marginalized communities like the landless laborers of eastern India for years. Devi has made important contributions to literary and cultural studies of India. Her empirical research into oral history as it lives in the cultures and memories of tribal communities was a first of its kind. Her powerful haunting tales of exploitation and struggle have been seen as rich sites of feminist discourse by leading scholars. Her innovative use of language has expanded the conventional borders of Bengali literary expression. Standing as she does at the intersection of vital contemporary questions of politics, gender and class, she is a significant figure in the field of socially committed literature. Some of her notable works are- *HajarChurashirMaa* (1974), *AranyerAdhikar* (1979), *Agnigarbha* (1978), *Murti* (1979), *Chotti Munda Evam Tar Tir* (1980) and the like.

Indira Goswami, recipient of some highest literary awards like, the SahityaAcademy(1983) and the Jnanpith Award(2001), the celebrated writer of Assam and India, popularly known by her pen name 'MamoniRaisomeGoswami' was born in 14th November 1942 and lived until her age of 69, is one of the significant female voices of Assam. An editor, poet, professor, scholar and writer of an unique caliber, many of Goswami's work have been translated into English from her native Assamese language which include, "The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker", "Pages Stained with Blood", "The Man from Chinnamasta" etc. She has acclaimed the crown of being called 'a renowned author' mainly because of her minute observation of the customs of the society and the evils prevailed amongst our social behavior and practices, which she reflected in her pen-picture of the fictional characters of subaltern, marginalized or double colonized group.

Women are assigned secondary position in the patriarchal society. They are looked upon as weak, fragile, incompetent, sexual object and the 'other' by the male dominated society. Mahasweta Devi, has made important contributions to literary and cultural studies in India. Her powerful and haunting tales of exploitation and struggle have been considered as a rich treasure of feminist discourse by leading scholars. Her innovative use of language has expanded the conventional borders of Bengali literary expression. The significant role of Mahasweta Devi, can be traced in the creation of the

characters like 'DopdiMejhen'; a tribal revolutionary, who has been arrested and gang raped in custody, turns the terrible wounds of her breast into a counter-offensive. In the famous short story, 'Draupodi', the female protagonist is being represented just the opposite of the typical women that the patriarchal society portrays. Devi has not allowed her female protagonist to be submissive and conquered by the male dominated society. Rape is sexual violence against women imposed by men. In a male dominated society, rape signifies power of men over women. Rape is also associated with dishonor and loss of chastity. So a woman who is being raped is supposed to be doomed in shame and guilt. They usually remain mute about their raped experience and never raise their voice against their predators. But, in fact, the rapist or the victimizer should be ashamed of their acts rather than the victim, because, it is they, who should be guilty about their inhuman acts and not the victim. Dopodi, being a woman of strong mind and will has defied the shame associated with rape.

"Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting and sharp as her ululation, 'What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?'"

She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my clothe on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me-come on, counter me -?"

Dopdi confronts her predators very courageously. In fact, her very body that was victimized becomes an embodiment of power to revolt against her predators.

In the story 'Sanskara' or 'The Offspring', 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. By the character of Damayanti,

Goswamitries to reveal an ironic representation of 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 structure. Widow Damayanti conceives a child by the lower caste Pitambor, in the out of their marriage relationship and refuses to let it born. She aborts the male fetus to keep her caste purity intact. The power of Indira Goswami, in portrayal of 'Damayanti' lies in its recognition that women are complexly located at the juncture of gender, caste and community. She has been placed in a superior 'caste' than Pitambor which forced her to abort in fear of the social norms. Even if she would be in an inferior caste, she probably would have chosen the same, as a woman, the fair sex, is not able to justify her stand against the social norms. It proves that the woman 'Damayanti' being double colonized by the society and by the customs, chosen to be one who conforms the social norms to be an insider, fearing to stand outside the norms. Her gesture of protest is unlike Draupodi, who literally stands at the sharp opposite of the hegemonic power structure and she is the real bold voice of all the voiceless.

Though the ways of protest of the two women were different, both of them stand as a unique example of exploitation of the patriarchal structure in our own societies. Damayanti was quite aware of what people talked about her; still she had made 'prostitution' as her source of livelihood. She had feed her two daughters by the earnings she made from the males that came to get physical pleasure from the single mother cum widow. One of such men was Pitambor too, but he wanted more from her in terms of a social marriage. Damayanti rendered all service to him but at last decided not to marry but to keep her freedom intact and lived the same life. 'Dopdi' of Mahasweta Devi protested through her naked body and 'Damayanti' of Indira Goswami protested by killing the male fetus of 'patriarchy'.

Findings and Conclusion:

The complexity of gendered resistance is very powerfully captured by both Indira Goswami and Mahasweta Devi. Damayanti's aborting her fetus to resist male

hegemony in the name of maintenance is actually their remonstrance against patriarchal forces and influence. So far raising one's voice against the victimizer is concerned, Draupadi (Dopdi) is not lagging behind, and in fact, far away from the conformist idea of protest against the male dominated society. Being a member of the subaltern part of the society, she has been left with less number of options to fight back her opposites, but she is bold and skilled enough to protest with her 'body'. Her naked body which has become an embodiment of protest aroused great fear to the rapist. They never imagined that they will not be able to cover up the crime that they considered it as their right and nobody in the society will ask question regarding the same. In 'Sanskara' if Damyanti is guilty of the 'sin', so are Pitambaor 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 human society.

Both Dopdi and Damayanti are bold enough to represent the womenfolk in Indian society. But on the face of it (society), there seems a vast contrast while going into the deeper insight of it. Draupadi, is non-conformist in her approach, and revolts against the exploitation against women, while Damayanti too raises her voice against the social customs, but she prefers to put herself in the conformist side, by refusing to give birth the most wanted child for Pitambor, the rich cum low caste land-owner. The symbolic representation of the 'male fetus' also depicts a lot, so far feminist narrative of the story 'Sanskara' is concerned.

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