

Dislocated Subjects : The Story of Widows in Present Day Society in the Light of the Novel : *Neelakanthi Braja*

Dr. Pritima Sharma

Introduction :

“Each and every portion of my life and feelings are closely associated to my entire works . I have tried to depict the agony experienced by me in those times through my character Saudamini the heroine” says Indira Goswami when I interviewed her in the year 2009 for my research work .

During the last two and half decades a large number of women novelists in Indian fiction in English have attracted great deal of attention and favourable comment . Indira Goswami occupies a significant place as a writer who advocates the struggle of woman in a patriarchal society. Published in 1976, *Neelakanthi Braja* is the first novel where Goswami highlighted the exploitation and poverty of widows dumped in a sacred city under the guise of religious sanction and tradition . This novel is an amazing narrative combined with fact and fiction , autobiography and reflection and Goswami tried to depict the confusion and mental agony she herself experienced after the death of her husband through the character of Saudamini .

Neelakanthi Braja presents the theme of women in a sexist society which maintains that in reality woman is differently made creature which reinforces and subscribes to typical patterns of behaviour. The novel presents a women's struggle to enter the public sphere by either exploiting the traditional role in woman in patriarchal society. It is based on the spiritual land of Braja - Brindavan . So in this paper I will be dealing with the oppression , suppression and subjugation of widows. Through the character of Mrinalini and Saudamini , life of a widow is described and how they were sent to Brindavan to live a life of suffering and hardship.

Neelakanthi Braja maps Goswami's pronouncement of the fact that gender is not natural fixed or universal but specific to their social, cultural and historical concepts. She portrays the agony and mental condition of the character of Saudamini.

Widows and Suffering :

Vrindavan is the backdrop of her novel *Neelakanthi Braja* (1976) in which the author has powerfully recreated and projected the ambience of Braja region - land of our Shri Lord Krishna which is held sacred and pure as a place of pilgrimage for devotees of Radha and Krishna with all its considerations.

The novel powerfully projects the lives of young widows abandoned in Vrindavan by their families. A picture of a horrifying and cruel condition of poverty and atrocities committed to women is visible in the novel. Indira Goswami is probably the first Indian novelist to take up this theme and reveal the cruelty, violence and pathos that surround the lives of these helpless women.

Neelakanthi Braja describes the journey of three women coming to terms with their circumstances. The physical and financial misery of those old widows desiring to take shelter at the feet of Muralidhar Krishna is amazing. In Vrindavan young widows are a prey to the so called 'Sadhus'. The widows are called 'Radheshyami' as they earn their share of food from temples by chanting "Radhashyam" all day long in lord Krishna's honour. In spite of their pitiable economic condition these widows often choose to starve. Whatever meager money they are able to collect through their mendicant wanderings is deposited to ensure that they are cremated after death. Experience has taught them that unless such an insurance is taken out, their corpses could well become the food for Jackals and dogs. Old Radheswami's are molested by drunken louts in an orgy of sex and violence. Their shaven heads, their foreheads covered with turmeric and sandalwood paste, their starving bodies showing through their ragged saris reflect the terrible position of widows in a society where shakti as 'Ma' is worshipped and epical Sita is epitomized.

"Now Sita's story is our own. Sita's exile is happening every moment everywhere. When leaving for the forest Sita distributed it bit by bit amongst us all." (58)

As quoted above, Goswami depends on her acquired experiences and she is honest about her observation. She observes and sensitively depicted the scene of Radheswami :

"Saudamini caught sight of some dismantled shacks. These are pigeon coop like shacks. A crowd of Radheswamis live in these shacks. They had skeleton like bodies and shabby dhotis on their bodies. But their foreheads were glowing with ashes and lines of sandalwood. (174).

Mrinalini is an ageing spinster burdened with the responsibility of her blind and

crippled father and insane mother . Her father Thakur Sahib has squandered his wealth in dissolute living and is forced to sell off his remaining property and take shelter in a hovel . Her mother clutters the place with discarded junk and gets into a frenzy time to time . Mrinalini sees no future for herself. Her dream of marriage and motherhood withers away as they sink into object poverty and she waits for her old parents to die. Her only friend is Sashi Prabha, a young widow in the service of an elderly impotent priest called Alamgadhi and hopelessly in love with a young swami whom she can only gaze at from a distance. She is one of many widows in Vrindavan who are 'united in prayer' to temple priests for physical protection and in the hope of receiving a decent funeral after they die . Her life changes when the temple is sold off and Alamgadhi loses his priesthood . Sashi is left alone. She is too old to make a living through selling of garlands or grinding sandal paste as she did when she was a child and too young to beg for alms like the Radheswamis . She takes shelter in a ghetto but the old women threaten to throw her out because she is the target for the predators in Vrindavan . Her situation reaches a crisis after Alamgadhi's death . Thrown out of her hovel by Radheswami she finally knocks at the door of her friend Mrinalini, who in spite of her own precarious situation offers her consolation and shelter, however temporary.

“These two women , badly battered by circumstances and scared by the prospect of a grim and uncertain future, lay on the damp floor, embracing each other, as if for assurance, like two infants ...” (235)

Saudamini, the protagonist of the novel is a young woman who has lost her husband soon after her marriage , seven years ago . She has fallen in love with a Christian , violating the strict code of a Hindu widow. Though her lover remains a shadowy figure in the narrative his existence is an indication of the turmoil in Saudamini's mind . Her pious and conservative parents bring her to Vrindavan in the hope that she will find solace in the environment of the holy town and accept her misfortune with equanimity . Saudamini makes a sincere effort to submit to the will of her parents but is seized with a secret rebelliousness and a growing sense of loneliness and despair . She refuses to accompany her mother on a circuit of the shrines of Braja and loses interest in assisting her father who is a doctor at his hospital. She wonders restlessly around observing the flow of life in Vrindavan taking in its beauty as well as its ugliness. The novelist writes :

All of a sudden she saw some people coming forward near Bhootgali. For some moments she stood at the same spot out of bewilderment ... Their unsteady voice could be heard : Run, run, they are pouncing on the Radheswamis. They are dragging , the old Radheswamis as like molesting the young woman . Not getting young woman the the swines have started dragging away the old women .

Saudamini hid her face with loose end of her saree . In this way she advanced forward and saw a Radheswami lying on the ground near Bhootgali . Coming quite close , Saudamini realized that the Radheswami was lying stark-naked . In the dim gleam of the street light she noticed that one hand of the old woman was on her breast and the other was trying to grope for something under the waist. . No, no there isn't much time - Any moment that pack of wolves might come this way . She started running in the darkness. (229)

She has strange fears that the walls of her room would collapse and crush her or that she would turn into dehumanized ghost like some of the Radhaswamis . The plight of Radheswamis are horrifying . Their skeletal bodies with tattered clothes on their bodies and untidy hair manifesting the curse of widowhood upon them . These widows saved money for their funerals . Many of them desired to die on the soil of Braja . They made their living by singing bhajans and dreamt of Murlidhar Krishna. That Krishna who involved every gopi along with Radha in amorous sport playing on flute . Saudamini undergoes this trauma too . She tells her friend the artist Chandrabhanu about the depression that has taken hold of her and the waves of passion and desire that overpower her when she sees young couples making love on the river bank . She asks a pious old Radheswami whether she has overcome desire and to her astonishment the woman confesses that she has not been able to control it despite struggling with it all through her youth . Even now when she touches her prayer beads , their smoothness remind her of chameli blossoms which she associates with youth , desire and sight of young students she encounters while walking through a garden.

Everywhere it is seen that there is the desire for Muralidhar Krishna . Is this desire or love towards Muralidhar Krishna a manifestation of their dissatisfied sexual desire ? Or is it the power of spiritualism rooted in their worship ? The question is unanswered . They were not concerned about the dust laden Parthasarthi of Krishna at the battlefield of Kurukshetra . Here nobody was interested to discover the Krishna of history. It is said that Krishna never returned to Brindavan after having left from Vrindavan to Dwarka. There is no need of that Krishna in Vrindavan of Radheswamis . It is the Muralidhar Krishna whose constant existence is there in Brindavan . As if it is with this Krishna that all the widows - including Saudamini share a mysterious relationship .

When Saudamini's restlessness reaches its peak , one night her father tells her that he understands her predicament and has written to her Christian lover to come and take her before her parents' death. A dream like situation comes in the life of Saudamini where she waits for her mysterious lover like waiting for Shri Krishna by Radheswamis . She moves

towards the river bank, she hears the sound of shehnai coming from the temple and her feet move like a moved married woman caught in a red scarf fortunate enough to die with her husband. Her lover, a shadowy figure takes her into boat and they make love while a storm rages outside.

Is the lover a man of flesh and blood or creation of Saudamini's mind or is he Death for whom she has been anticipating as the only release for a Hindu widow? Saudamini is drowned symbolically ending her life as a woman united with her lover and not as a widow. This is significant. The end of Saudamini shows some positive light enveloping the realm of widows.

Indira Goswami poses the most pertinent question that how will society force these widows to languish in isolation or premature death. Goswami has also illustrated two scenarios of Braja- Brindaban. One is holy atmosphere and the other is the exploitation and awful sight of Radheswamis. Here in this context it can be mentioned that Amitav Ghosh has also tried to portray the condition of upperclass women in Bengal who were married to men much older than their age and after their husband's death, they were compelled to live a life of penance and suffering in Brindaban in the novel *Sea of Poppies*. He has also described the existence of spiritual life between God and his devotee which is Pure and Spiritual.

Amitav Ghosh has commented that Indira Goswami is one of the pre-eminent literary figures in India and that she is an important voice in championing women's causes and has done much to highlight the plight of widows.

Conclusion :

I conclude by stating Indira Goswami's words :

My only sorrow in this is that I was so involved in portraying the mental agony of Saudamini in *Neelakanthi Braja* that in spite of getting chance I didn't accept the chance of portraying the outer world of Vrindavan extensively. Once I asked a leader, " Why doesn't the government do anything for these Radheswamis widows of Vrindavan? Haven't these ashrams of Bhajans turned into immoral places?"

He replied "Those are people of other states ! People of Bengal! They have burdened our place with a social problem of their state "" . I was thoroughly stunned , I dreamt that one day all these will unitedly voice protest . Let that protest be sound of dry bones! Yet I believed that there is a power of truth , that is why a rebellious character of '*Neelakanthi Braja*' always dreamed that a light is approaching near' Even the illiterate ignorant dregs of humanity

the Radheswamis have picked up these pearls of wisdom . They have not jumped into the Jamuna . They have accepted life as it is . They have accepted life with all its pitfalls and all its struggles. I have seen their splashes of blood but never seen surrender to despair. Anyway keeping one's head in such a context, especially a female head is indeed a challenging task. (*An Unfinished Autobiography*)

The literature reflects the everchanging reality of life . The portrayal of position of women in the society is the important phenomena . In recent times the position of women has been undergoing a rapid change in the world . And so the portrayal of women and their sufferings as widows and other kinds of oppression finds a significant place in the study of literature. The woman is also a creator of literature and therefore a woman's presence in literature is pervading and so Indira Goswami boldly voices for the marginalized , the powerless and the unfortunate .

Indian society shows women as ideally warm, gentle , dependent and submissive . The conventional image of women still exists today . Indian society glorify the stereotypical virtues of Indian women like patience , devotion , and acceptance of her status . Goswami through her novel reveals these aspects and alongwith it we find a struggle between individual and social being shackled by conventions and customs as is the case of Saudamini and Mrinalini .

Indira Goswami has tried to depict the sufferings of widows from all section of Indian society . She has dealt with a serious social problem. The misery and isolation of widowhood with reference to women of Brahmin as well as non- Brahmin community who are sent to Vrindavan . Goswami gives us hope that if women get emotional and spiritual support from their male counterparts as is the case of Saudamini who finally is united with her lover in dream showing a positive light in the realm of widows . She has tried to depict widow's search for identity and their right to live a life of freedom and dignity .

Works Cited

- Burjhor, S.K., *Indira Goswami and her fictional World; The search for Sea*: Delhi: B.R.Publishing Corporation, 2002. Print.
- Chaudhury, NDR, *Critical Perspectives*, New Delhi : Swarup & Sons, 2005. Print.
- Goswami, I., *Neelakanthi Braja*, Guwahati ; Students Store, 2001. Print.
- Goswami, M.R., *Adha Lekha Dostabez*, Guwahati : Students Store, 1996. Print.
- . *Upanyash Samagrah*. Students Store. 2001, Print.
- Rajul, S., *Caged Birds : Widows in the novels of Indira Goswami*, New Delhi : B.R.Publishing Corporation, 2002. Print.