

# A Study of Female Subjectivity and Agency in Indira Goswami's: "A City of Its Nakedness" and "The Offspring"

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## Abstract:

Diversity is one of the significant characteristics in India, e.g. caste, community, culture, tradition, etc., and due to such diversities, social hierarchies can also be seen or felt as aspects relating to female subjectivity have seldom been a part of the literary canon. The paper's centrality is established on the dual subjection and oppression of women protagonists in Goswami's stories. The study of female subjectivity brings forth issues such as sexual surrender and unwilling physical consummation within and outside the marriage, where female characters eventually lack agency and search for their individuality. It also prompts a challenge to ethical boundaries of the imagination to the readers and enables an understanding of the clamour of the female quest for identity. This present paper attempts to locate different forms of oppression in the select short stories of Indira Goswami, i.e. "A City of its Narrative" from the collection *Relive Indira Goswami: The Rich Legacy of Her Stories* (2014) and "The Offspring" from the collection *The Shadow of Kamakhya: Stories* (2002)

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Pramod K. Nayar, in his work *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* (2009), quotes Judith Butler's assertion that sex and gender are indeed products of culture and that society is based on a solid foundation of knowledge and power. He says gender is created based on an individual's purpose or function in a particular society. If gender and performance are following community values and regulations, society will embrace them. However, performativity is also amenable to "negotiation and change, to conflict and contest" (91). In this essay, the female voice in two short tales by renowned Indian author Indira Goswami Assam is examined from a sexual and practical standpoint. These two short pieces of Indira Goswami's "The Offspring" and "A City in Its Nakedness" are translated by Gayatri Bhattacharyya.

International communication relies heavily on translation. No other tool can compare to the rich power of translation. It is a means of communicating our opinions and thoughts to another person. The contribution of translation to the transformation of Indian society has multiplied. The goal for which a translation was created, representing the target audience's needs, determines whether the translation is successful. In literature, translation is crucial to nearly every genre, including novels, essays, and short stories.

The constituents are given a more immersive perspective when short stories are used instead of lengthy literature. These tales may be read rather quickly. Additionally, they provide a wide variety of light unmatched by any other literary genre. Because it is feasible to distinguish between the characters and observe the fragments of stillness that would be difficult to study in a long narrative, short stories provide depth even in their briefness. By selecting the genre, the research could better investigate the ideas of female voices, silences, and survival. Women authors successfully tried their hands at penning short stories.

Indira Goswami (1942-2011) was one of the distinguished Indian authors, poetess, short story writer and social activist from North East India who criticizes the savage and gloomy reality of Indian women in modern India. Her incredible writing style introduces readers to a brand-new universe of experiences, emotions, perspectives, characters, and circumstances. She defies the classification of the female experience in the typical Indian home context by crafting an unusual tale through careful writing—one of the most prolific writers in Indian literature.

Apurbajyoti Hazarika, in her article, "Protesting Female Voices in Mamoni Raisom Goswami 's Short Stories", discusses that Significantly, Goswami's courageous and emotional narratives—which in a usually patriarchal culture were previously seen as taboo—delineate frankly the needs and pleasure of women in a rich lexicon with metaphors and images reminiscent of feminine sensuality. The way Mamoni Goswami depicts the female characters in her books shows how the patriarchal structure perceives women, even though she does not consistently portray women in her works (18).

The theoretical and meta-theoretical paradigms are prone to both physical and intellectual oppression, and this is because of female subjectivity. It has been demonstrated that women's dual subordination in a cultural binary substantially impacts how the world is depicted and is more likely to lack agency. The ideas of freedom and empowerment seem more intellectually imposed and less realistic. Subjectivity looks at how women felt their roles and pursuits enhanced or diminished their feeling of identity and purpose. The purpose of subjectivity is to examine history from the perspective of those who lived it, especially by including regular women. For subjectivity to exist, "women's consciousness" must be considered.

"The Offspring" depicts the misery of a beautiful but impoverished woman named Damayanti and the efforts of a childless man to acquire public acknowledgement of the paternity of a child. While "The City in its Nakedness" depicts the contemporary status of the lonely lady. Allegations of deteriorating the social representation game played by men and women in suitable texts in modern society are frequently accompanied by feelings of frustration and loneliness. The article will make the case that sex and sexuality are culturally ingrained concepts rather than individual desires or biological orders. This research study only uses primary and secondary analytical sources in its analysis. Within the patriarchal system, women have always been marginalized and oppressed. They are seen as tools or sources of entertainment by the male chauvinists. In this context,- Beauvoir, in her work, *The Second Sex* (2010), states;

Man defines woman not in herself but according to him; she is not regarded as an independent creature and is the one, what man decides; as a result, she is referred to as "the sex,"... She distinguishes and separates herself from man, but he does not in respect to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other. (5-6)

In a primarily male culture, women have historically been viewed as the "second sex" and the "other". Since the dawn of time, women have been oppressed and deprived of their fundamental rights, which has weakened both their dignity and the authority of men. Limiting women makes it feasible for

patriarchy to persist. As a result, women are either compelled to stay inside the walls of their homes or, if they attempt to get away, have their feathers pulled out. Similarly, "The Offspring" examines how the author dispels the concept of patriarchy by reinventing the rebellious character Damayanti, who consciously takes action to demonstrate her rebellion against patriarchal mores institutionalized in her culture. The narrative reflects the issue of masculine desire and goal for an offspring. Damayanti successfully challenged male hegemony by being regarded as a product, a sexual item, and a way to produce children to continue Pitambar's family line. She effectively shatters the conventional belief that the female body is a place where the dominant authority of patriarchy should direct and govern (3-4).

Goswami establishes a patriarchal system in which a woman is evaluated based on her fecundity. Many societies denigrate barren women as unlucky. She doesn't speak a word during the entire narrative. She lives a meaningless existence and imbibes what she observes. On the other hand, Damayanti, a Jajaamani Brahmin widow, is driven to engage in prostitution due to pure helplessness. She is the only income provider for her family of two daughters, so her only other option is to engage in whoring.

What can I do? I had to live. They even stopped orders for sacred threads and puffed rice. They considered me impure, contaminated! And those tenants! They have turned thieves and don't give my share of paddy. They take advantage of my helplessness. In these circumstances, where should I have gone with my two tiny daughters? I have not paid the land revenue. The land, too, will be auctioned off! What can I do? (5)

The narrative demonstrates the place and function of women in a patriarchal society. Goswami explains how women are viewed as little more than a means of gratifying male lust. The narrative contains several examples of objectification and dehumanization of women. Pitambar and Krishnakanta's eroticizing and sexualizing gaze on Damayanti is depicted in the moment of their first encounter. To quote from the text,

Her rain-drenched clothes clung to her body. The colour of her skin was that of the glittering foam of boiling sugarcane juice. Her figure was rather plump, but she was beautiful. Her blouse had stretched tight and was pulled up, revealing the white flesh which to the two men looked as tempting as the meat dressed and hung up on iron hooks in a butcher's shop"! (15)

Pitambar lost her first wife, making the existence of her second wife less significant. Unlike the previous wife, she is gentle and subservient but is worthless to Pitambar because the bedridden lady cannot bear him a child. She is yelled at while being called a "barren bitch" (16). Conversely, Pitambar values and desires Damayanti for her physical attractiveness and fruitful womb. This emphasizes the patriarchal idea that women should only be seen as sexual objects and as the owners of "the womb."

In addition to addressing the issue of women's oppression in a male-dominated culture, the narrative highlights the misery of a widow via the persona of Damayanti. She must work odd jobs and sell her body to support herself and her two girls. She prepares to sleep with the elderly Pitambar out of helplessness, but Krishnakanta (the priest) even threatens her with Panchayati and societal penalties to punish her for her reprehensible profession. On the other hand, Pitambar sees her frequently to ensure that she doesn't have a sexual relationship with another guy during that time so that she can have his child in her womb. When Damayanti becomes pregnant, they want to do everything in their power to prevent the abortion of the foetus (29)

The tale, therefore, depicts a world in which predetermined ideals and customs enslave women. However, this idea of servitude in the narrative conflicts with caste inequality, another significant problem in Indian society. However, Damayanti agrees to have a sexual relationship with Pitambar under duress brought on by the need for money, the elderly priest's threats, and other factors. She is always conscious of her caste status and feels tainted after every interaction with the Mahajan. Every time they get intimate, she takes a bath to become clean. She ultimately kills Pitambar's child in her womb. She buries it in the backyard because she cannot get over the agony of being polluted—a feminist interpretation of the narrative views this rejection of Pitambar's progeny as an act of resistance.

Damayanti expresses her ability to avoid using her womb, a woman's greatest gift. After learning of her deed, the man who intended to exploit her as an object and force his demands on her is devastated and worried. She has, in this sense, imparted a lesson to him. But this perspective becomes incredibly complicated when Damayanti explains the motivation for such a furious deed. She says, "Yes, I have buried it! It was a boy! But he is just a lump of flesh, blood and mud!" (30)

In the same literary work, the narrative simultaneously criticizes caste hierarchy and the exploitation of women. She may be attempting to convey the difficult situation of women in a society yet intact with so many rigidities through the tension between these two ideals. Additionally, it implies that women are susceptible irrespective of caste or income. She continues to be at the bottom of every social structure. Indira Goswami was a radical thinker regarding the society she inhabited. She exposes the plight of the weaker, victimized part, regardless of whether there is caste supremacy or gender dominance. She challenges the rigidity of such societal standards and shows how pointless they are. The two elements of the narrative mentioned above cannot be separated, especially in the setting of India. As a result, the struggle between the two opens room for another aspect of feminism. In this context, the well-known critic G.P. Sarmah's remarks,

One of the critical causes of the social marginalization that exists in Indian society is cast superiority. However, regardless of caste or society, women have always been oppressed and marginalized. In this setting, where there is a caste system and patriarchy, the role of women is quite complicated. Readers are shocked and charmed by Goswami's courageous stand against anti-humanist conventional norms in society. She consistently protests against any attack on humanity in her fictional work while disguising it as an artistic statement. And in this, she pays particular sensitive attention to women and workers—two of our society's most oppressed and mistreated sectors. (48)

De Beauvoir further pointed out that the bourgeois woman performs three significant functions: wife, mother and entertainer. In *A City in its Nakedness*, Urmila performs the same at various stages. She first serves as her husband's wife while away with another lady. She attempts to act as the mother by bringing Jagannath into her house to teach him, only to be harshly criticized by him. Lastly, she serves as a source of entertainment for Rupachandra, Professor Thakur, and Jasowant, who merely come to see her to forget their struggles and difficulties without considering her own. These patriarchal agents utilize Urmila for their gain, and she becomes the victim of their actions. The title's use of the word "Nakedness" has several levels of meaning.

It means "the state of not wearing any clothing or covering." The term represents the nakedness of society in this tale: society as it is when it is without guilt, conscience, sympathy, or care for others. (156). The short tale "A City in its Nakedness" depicts the nakedness of contemporary society and the loneliness and misery of a Delhi-based mother who adopts the impoverished little boy Jagannath as her son and raises him with devastating results. The main character, Urmila's spouse, frequently abandoned her at his Delhi

flat, where her husband's male acquaintances joined her. She finds stability in her life as an impoverished, abandoned, and alienated person thanks to her new position as a lecturer at Delhi University. She frequently receives visits from Professor Thakur and journalist Roapchandra. Urmila states: "Rupchandra waited for Professor Thakur to leave him and her alone when they were seated together, almost as if she were hoping for it. Thakur believed that the reporter would depart. The two guys are truly buddies, yet they turn into the worst foes in certain situations. 145). Urmila is a stunning woman with a masculine mentality and male gaze. To please her guests, she works as a female host. She is aware of her visitor's objective. But Urmila tries to find comfort exclusively in her former boyfriend, Jaswant. Jaswant, who she believes was corrupted by her errant husband, was the only man who could create a new world for her. (150-151). She tells Jaswant that she wants their relationship to go beyond this and have a strong foundation." (152). While Urmila enjoys Jaswant's companionship, her world is again turned upside down when Jaswant yells, "Give me sex! You must have sex with me! Only sexual interactions may endure forever. (152).

Despite women's freedom and empowerment, the woman became a victim of male aggression because of the day's dwindling sympathy and eroding social standards. The long-standing patriarchal system has already influenced people's views and cannot be overturned entirely, no matter how much noise is made about equal protection for women or pushing them to the front to be considered humans first. In this regard, Sylvia Walby (1989) is well-known for her seminal "Theorising Patriarchy" (1989), which she defined as "a system of social construction and function in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (214). As the ultimate power source in a patriarchal society, men have special privileges and rights that disadvantage women. Women suffered bodily and mental harm due to being oppressed due to men's dominance. Women are considered as inferiors and undervalued in patriarchal societies.

Urmila is made a woman by the general authority, and rightfully so since she should be wary of a compulsive and forceful society consisting of males like Jaswant. Urmila is forced to coexist with an unconventional feminine identity in a threatening reality. Urmila is now concentrating on her adoptive son, Jagannath. Urmila starts to look out for Jagannath even though he knows how frequently these individuals have used her. Says Jagannath in a single clause. "There is no distinction between those nasty women who reside in the same slum as you, knock on the door, and depart. Because he is weak, he is upset with Urmila. Jaganath could be the only one who understands how vulnerable a solitary lady is amid the nakedness of the city. She can't handle being alone. He then makes his way back to Jagannath from a shanty. Now an old lad, Jagannath goes back to Urmila. He moves in with his second mother but is forced to stop because of his rising blood pressure. In these two short tales, sex or gender is used as a performative or practical construct. In this context, Sabal et al.'s article Body Gender and sexual politics of Belonging discusses,

As is well known, women's bodies are built both physically and mentally for conception, reproduction, and male pleasure. The premise for the commercial manipulation of women's bodies is the consumption of the body for male pleasure. The body agenda has included objectifying women's bodies for the male gaze. (44).

Damyanti, Urmila, and Pitamber's sick wife are the offspring of a power plant that creates women and gender, and you expect it to function correctly according to the social rules they live in. In contrast to her third partner, whom she adores, who betrays her with his sexual pervasion, she never raises a voice against the two male visitors who always try to manipulate her sexually. The short tales chosen are about the marginalized female space that we often hear about and would not have altered if gender roles, identity,



and relationships had not undergone structural change. They cannot talk due to social and cultural constraints—the efficacy of sexual behaviour concerning power dynamics and social position. Even the translator, Gayatri Bhattacharya, could "move beyond" the original author without distortion.

Women's bodies are developed physically and intellectually for reproduction, or as it is often called, procreation, and for the enjoyment of males. In her stories, Goswami reveals the maltreatment, physical abuse, and psychological anguish that the majority of Indians experience. It will also include in its scope how she stands out due to her genuine compassion for the weak and vulnerable women and their silenced voices inside and outside their households.

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