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## **Dealing with Patriarchy in Dr. Indira Goswami's Short Story *The Offspring***

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### **Abstract**

*Dr. Indira Goswami is a distinguished novelist ,poetess, short story writer and a social activist from North East India .Her amazing kind of writings familiarize the readers with a new world of experience ,feelings, perceptions ,characters and situations. Her short story 'The Offspring' is a meticulous expression of the writer that critiques the crude and dark realities of contemporary India at a macroscopic level. A close reading of the story unveils the multiplicity of issues that contribute to the current feminist debates .The paper is an exploration of the writer's serious engagement with the issue of patriarchy and its resistance through subversive act.*

***Key Words: patriarchy, resistance, subversive, engagement.***

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One of the most celebrated writer, poet, professor and scholar of contemporary India, Dr. Indira Goswami always more popularized by her pen name Dr. Mamoni Raisom Goswami has enlarged her literary oeuvre with several hundreds of short stories, novels, poems etc. Goswami is a recipient of Jnanpith Award along with a number of accolades. Eminent Indian writer Amitav Ghosh appreciates Goswami: “ Indira Goswami is one of the pre-eminent literary figures in India and a woman of remarkable courage and conviction...She has also been an important voice in championing women's causes, and has done much to highlight the plight of widows.” She is also a sophisticated practitioner of the art of storytelling and her stories have a wider appeal despite their localization within the borders of Assam .Originally written in the Assamese language her stories get translated into English and many Indian languages by eminent translators. Some of her stories have been rendered into English by herself. The paper studies the short story “The Offspring” translated into English by the author herself that forms a part of the book “Indira Goswami (Mamoni Raisom Goswami) & Her Fictional World-The Search for the Sea” compiled by Kaikous Burjor Satarawala. The Assamese title of the story is “Xanskar.” The story perspectivizes the issues of motherhood, patriarchy, casteism etc. The paper is an exploration of the operation of various patriarchal forces that have a strong hold in the story and their subversion by the conscious efforts made by the rebellious character Damayanti to counter it.

The Feminist Movement is a socio-political reality that has grown and developed over a period of time in a variety of different ways : protest against oppression ,legal reform, nationalistic concerns, education and social change being only a few of these. (Jasbir Jain: 'Indigenous Roots of Feminism' 1) Casual concern for the emancipation of women from the convention of patriarchy can be traced since earlier times .In ancient times women were also exploited and they were not recognized as countable human beings .But gradually many women writers began to raise their voices against women exploitation ,women oppression ,women harassment along with a number of other issues.

There was a growing consciousness among the women to go beyond their confined space. It took the shape of a movement called Feminism. Feminism is also an issue of identity, space, subject hood and freedom . Patriarchy has become an issue of feminist debate. It has a notion that woman by the fact of her gender is an eternal colon of man. Women are seen going beyond the proven codes of patriarchy in which she, by dislodging the colonizers, becomes the governor of her own colony. Jnanpith Award winning writer Indira Goswami makes a deliberate attempt in "The Offspring" to show how a Brahmin woman struggles through oppressive patriarchal structures for her survival .In this context the writer vividly presents the predicament of women in general and their adjustment to cope up in the situation.

"The Offspring" is a naturalistic portrayal of people reduced to the level of beasts by social and cultural compulsions the story is set in the district of Kamrup in Assam. The narrative starts with landlord of a remote village of Assam. Pitambar sitting in front of his house and his wife is bedridden with rheumatism inside his house. The local priest Krishnakanta makes an enquiry into the family life of Pitambar and comes to know that he is without any offspring to carry on his legacy. Pitambar's marriage fails to yield any offspring to continue his line, and his present state of childlessness becomes an obsession with him. Krishnakanta , a very greedy Brahmin immediately whispers in Pitambar's ears, " what about another marriage, eh?" It is a coincidence when they are conversing, their eyes are drawn towards a young woman passing by. Her name is Damayanti, the Bangara Brahmin widow of a young Brahmin priest of a Satra who is living a life of austerity and high caste standing . She is known among the people as a prostitute .The priest is ready to act as a go between the two by strong power of scheming. Pitambar and Damayanti come into a very close contact out of their needs under the machinations Krishnakanta. Their needs are of different types: the former is in need of a child whereas the latter is in need of the money to continue her survival. Damayanti has been doing some odd kinds of jobs since her widowhood to feed her two daughters. She has her ill reputation of several abortions during her widowhood .The priest also threatens her if she refuses, she will face public disgrace. Though hunger compels Damayanti to sleep with him, she cannot overcome her horror of pollution by a man from a lower caste, and undergoes an abortion. Pitambar comes to know through the Brahmin priest that again she did the abortion and buries the foetus in her backyard .It shatters Pitambar's dream of continuing his lineage .The story reaches its climax when Pitambar is found digging her backyard to have a look at the foetus. Goswami critiques the conventions of patriarchal society by creating the female character Damayanti. The story beautifully deconstructs the widow stereotype and empowers socially marginalized women.

A deeper reading of the story unfolds that the writer locates the female character Damayanti in a male centered situation and set up where she has been rendered mute .The theme of male desire for a offspring has its visibility .She knows that she is always treated as a commodity, an object of pleasure and a means of acquiring an offspring to continue the family line of Pitambar .The evil gaze of Krishnakanta and Pitambar falls on her body " 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!"(Goswami-70).This type of physical description is quite reflective of typical male gaze at female body. Damayanti is here compared with the meat in a butcher's shop. It gives us an understanding that women can only become a prey for men .The female body here is a site for sexual exploitation and subordination that adds to the perpetuation of different forms of oppression.

The narrative in "The Offspring" is constructed by the interaction between the two voices: one dominant and other the muted .The male characters vis-s-vis Pitambar, Krishnakanta and the

Brahminical society at large have strong affiliations with the dominant voice and Pitambar's desire for offspring is one manifestation of this voice. Damayanti has to carry on the burden of the restraints and constraints the society imposes on her. One can hear the muted theme of female survival in her voice which is not so audible. She is not always reactionary to the words spoken by the males. This kind of silence does not imply that she is inarticulate. Her consciousness of the 'feminine sensibility' as a woman, as a widow in that social milieu prevent her to go beyond that space. The second wife of Pitambar lying on her death bed invites the readers to experience the mental world of a woman who is going to be a psychological victim also. His obsessive mind lets him decide to marry Damayanti only for continuing family line when his second wife is bedridden. This is a shocking sight for us. Here, giving birth to a child is more important than the health of the woman who is bedridden because the body of a woman is considered to be a machine for the purpose of reproduction to continue the family line.

The story is about the plight of women in a patriarchal set up. The story is a strong critique of the crude and dark realities of the social system in which a woman is merely possessor of her womb. The female body is used by the patriarchal society to serve its interests. Jasbir Jain in "Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency" says, "A prevalent perception of women, across cultures, has framed them as matter and as such subordinate. Their physical beauty, role in the procreative process and use as objects of pleasure and sexual satisfaction has thrown their faculties into the background." (Jain.24) The womb of the women can only serve for keeping up the family line. The role of a woman is only limited to that space. Damayanti's decision to destroy the foetus exemplifies her rebellious spirit. She transgresses the patriarchal laws here. Pitambar becomes turbulent when the information is provided to him by Krishnakanta 'Alas! She has destroyed it. She has got rid of the unborn child. She will not carry the seed of a low caste. She is a Brahmin of Shandilya gotra (a lineage founded by sages like Shandilya, Bhardawaj, Gautam and others). Oh, Pitambar! Pitambar! She has destroyed your child!' She is using her womb as an instrument to teach the lessons of womanhood to people like Krishnakanta and Pitambar. The story shows different facets of patriarchal society at work: religious orthodoxy, caste system, the issue of lineage and the notion of female fatale.

In the story Damayanti's body becomes the instrument to subvert the assigned norms of patriarchy in a Brahmin society. She is a Brahmin widow who refuses to feed on the vegetarian food and also engage herself in business with Marwaris to earn her livelihood. The echo of the patriarchal norms sound strong in the following words of Krishnakanta when he discovers Damayanti come out from the space of a woman: "I hear that she, a widow, eats meat, fish, and everything... This girl has brought disgrace to Banngara Brahmins. She has thrown to the winds all restraints and rituals prescribed for widows." (Goswami 71) Here Damayanti asserts her own individuality by ignoring the restraints and rituals prescribed for her by the male dominated society. Here starts her journey to construct her identity as a countable human being.

The story highlights the contemporary social realities of rural India. Damayanti has to live in a society where the male who is the norm and the symbol of lineage and the females are non-entities. Pitambar and Krishnakanta are the products of the society that prioritizes only male values. They are governed by the ideology that values the man-woman relationship in a hierarchial order. Bharta Bhusan Mohanty in his comparative study of Shauna Singh Baldwin's "Naina" and Indira Goswami's "The Offspring" discovers the current feminist debates relating to patriarchy and motherhood in the story. He opines, "The author of the story has revealed authentically the wretchedness of the subtle functioning of various patriarchal norms, which victimize, exploit and

dehumanize women like Damayanti and the sick wife of Pitambar.” The use and abuse of the female body is to reduce it to the feminine. Krishnakanta’s warning to Damayanti not to undergo abortion is indicative of the imposition of male norm .He says to Pitambar, ‘Like the vulture keeping vigil over a corpse, I’ll guard that woman. Not only that, I’ll give a strict warning to that old hag not to give any of her evil herbs and roots to Damayanti for abortion.’

In “Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution”, Adrienne Rich is of the view that motherhood as an institution is structured by the domination of patriarchal values which marginalize the women’s capabilities, but the ‘mothering’ involves the community of women to resist this institution and make it as a power and empowerment of women.(quoted from Saikia, Pramasa: Damayanti’s Body as Power and Resistance in Indira Goswami’s The Offspring).For Damayanti motherhood works as a strong tool to challenge the existing patriarchal system. Generally, it secures the desires and aspirations of the males. It devalues the wishes of a woman. It just treats the female body as a machine to manufacture only the offsprings. In the story Damayanti succeeds in aborting the male child developing in her womb as a result of the sexual intercourse with Pitambar. She has deliberately made abortion in order to prove that only a woman can take the final decision regarding her motherhood.

The story’s dialogue with the myth constituted by the Nala-Damayanti in the Mahabharata opens up another possibility to look at the issue of patriarchy in a new light. Mythical Damayanti is a symbol of unpatrolled beauty ,chastity and devotion to her husband Nala. Goswami’s portrayal of Damayanti is completely opposite to the character in the epic with all its negative attributes . This is a deliberate attempt of the writer to dismantle the mythical meanings traditionally associated with Indian women .This kind of reversal reminds one of Mahasweta Devi’s Draupadi. Damayanti’d defiant self becomes visible when she discovers Pitambar digging the aborted child. In a frenzy She utters: “what will you get there? Yes, I have buried it! It was a boy! But he is now just a lump of flesh, blood and mud! Stop it! Stop it!”

Thus we see that though women are generally dominated in the patriarchal set up of society but the fact that only a woman bears the capacity to carry a child in her womb and give birth to it confers upon her a power which she can exercise against the patriarchal society if she intends to do so to upset someone’s machinations .A woman is can be a source of dignity, honour and power of which she can exercise whenever she wishes to do over the powerful man whose life she holds under her control. Damayanti’s conscious attempt to abort Pitambar’s probably male child can be viewed neither the influence of medical technologies over a woman’s body nor the result of her physical relationship with a low caste man but it is only a fight against patriarchal forces to keep intact the honour and dignity of a woman. By using her body Damayanti makes Pitambar suffer in the end. He in a state of utter helplessness says, “...what tortures my soul will go through, only this doomed sufferer knows! And now this seductive sorceress holds my life in her fist. Oh Bapu, tell me! What should I do?” The male dominated society considers Damayanti as an object of desire & a possessor of mere womb, yet she does not allow it to get a stronghold over her.

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