



Linguistic Gynocentric Study of 'The Offspring'

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I. INTRODUCTION

The gynocentric study is women centered which differs from that of the male counterparts. There are four pillars or models of difference of theories of women's writing on which the whole theory of gynocentricism is built up. They are biological, linguistic, psychoanalytical and cultural. Each is an effort to define and differentiate the qualities of women writers and their texts. My attempt is to discuss in detail a short story of Indira Goswami's "The Offspring" from the linguistic point of view. As Showalter in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" discusses:

Women are the blanks and holes in communication, what is unspoken, solidified into gesture, silence or nonsense. On the level of theory then, as well as of social structures, women are excluded from the literary scene. If they are to enter it, they must make their difference a subject, without opting for the principle of identity or oneness (Godard: 1987, 16).

The above statement highlights the problem of language faced by women in the patriarchal society. An important issue of concern of gynocritics is women's writing and their language. They have focused on the specificity of 'women's language'. According to gynocritics, language used by women is different from language used by men "whether sex differences in language use can be theorized in terms of biology, socialization or culture; whether women can create new language of their own; and whether speaking, reading and writing are all gender marked" (Showalter : 1988, 339).

Language for women is constructed by men. During the course of history, men have created norms and rules for women's language and speech. They have been deprived of "essence of expression" and have been jolted into the abyss of silence. In androcentric society, women do not have access to language to reveal their own view. What should be spoken by women is decided by male constructed culture. When a man writes, he is hailed authoritatively and reverently, almost gloriously as a great writer. But, if the writer happens to be a woman, she is condescendingly granted the status or label of a 'woman writer'. She writes as a woman as her experiences of life are different. Even Jane Austen who enjoys canonical status in the great tradition of the English novel, is supposed to have worked only on 'one – inch piece of ivory'.

If we accept Foucault's concept that what is true depends on who controls discourse and the answer is man controls the discourse. So naturally man's domination of discourse has trapped women inside a male truth. From this point of view, it makes sense for women writers to contest men's control of language rather than merely to treat into a ghetto of feminine discourse. K. K. Ruthven in "Constructing Feminist Theories of Criticism" remarks:

She would be able to speak her own meanings and experiences, provided she was able to communicate in a language free from patriarchal interference. But 'woman' is not an essence but a construct in the domain of patriarchal culture, a dispersed subject, historically variable, socially feminized and a site on which masculine meanings get spoken and masculine desires enacted (Ruthven: 1984, 45).

Thus, feminism is also a struggle for the right to speak and write. Gynocritics like Mary Jacobus propose women to try to "modify language and write within the male discourse... ceaselessly deconstructing language to write what cannot be written" (1979, 12-13). They have focused their inquiry upon the specificity of 'woman's language'. They believe that the specific differences between male and female language that has been identified cannot be explained in terms of "two separate sex specific language" because the use of language has been a social and cultural giving to male and female writers. Gynocritics refute the idea of "genderlect". They wish to work on communicative strategies providing equal access to language for both the genders. Gynocritics are in search of that type of language which is not oppressive or does not leave women speechless but loosens their tongue. Robin Lakoff has suggested that the problem is not that language is insufficient to express women's consciousness but that women have been denied complete usage of language and therefore they express themselves best through silences, gaps, euphemisms and circumlocution.

But if they remain silent they will be excluded from the history, and if they start speaking and writing like men, they will enter the history. By remaining silent, they become what Ann Rosalind Jones calls "the invisible and unheard sex" (1985, 200) in her essay "Inscribing Femininity: French Theories of the Feminine". Emphasizing this view, Elizabeth Janeway mentions:



The marginality and powerlessness of women is reflected in the ways women are expected to speak (Janeway : 1971, 10-11).

Writers like Adrienne Rich call the present language an “oppressor’s language” while others attack it as “sexist” and “abstract”. According to Nelly Furman:

It is through the medium of language that we define and categorize areas of difference and similarity, which in turn allow us to comprehend the world around us. Male -centered categorizations pre - dominate in American English and subtly shape our understanding and perception of reality; this is why attention to increasingly directed to the inherently oppressive aspects for women of a male constructed language system (Furman: 1978, 182).

Nelly Furman puts the problem of language by women very appropriately. While quoting Lacan , Andrea Nye , in *Feminist Theory and the Philosophies of Man* writes that as the available language for woman to use "is itself sexist, she will always either replicate sexist attitudes or fumble inarticulately and impotently" (174). While quoting Carolyn Bruke's views about language in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* even Showalter puts:

The central issue in much recent women's writing ... is to find and use an appropriate female language.... The very form of the dominant mode of discourse shows the mark of the dominant masculine ideology. Hence , when a woman writer writes or speaks herself into existence , she is forced to speak in something like a foreign tongue , a language with which she may not be personally comfortable (Showalter: 1981 ,191).

The above statements by various theorists mention that women are not completely comfortable with the language created by male dominated culture. According to the gynocritics , the problem is not that the language is not sufficient in expressing the women's consciousness and experiences but women have not been allowed to use all the resources of language. Thus, study of language in which women try to express their feelings, emotions, desires and experiences is a very important aspect of gynocentric theory. American, French and British feminist critics have drawn attention to the philosophical, linguistic and patriarchal problems of women's use of language. Women can create new language of their own. That is why women writers like Indira Goswami express themselves through silence, gaps and sometimes euphemisms and circumlocution.

The linguistic model of gynocentric theory is applied to Indira Goswami's one of the famous short stories ‘The Offspring’ which is a story of a widow, Damayanti , who was forced to take up prostitution. She is contracted to bear the child of Pitambar , a rich , low ~ caste man. The story ends with a surprise reversal with Damayanti aborting the child and thus asserting her right over her body. At a surface level, Damayanti's protest may be viewed within the frames of caste and gender. At a deeper level lie questions relating to the ethics of Damayanti's action. Through the whole incident, the author has highlighted how women's language is different from man's language, how womanly experiences are described through different type of language.

'The Offspring' is a wonderful short story written by Indira Goswami which revolves round a young and beautiful brahmin prostitute who sells her flesh but hesitates to conceive a child for a low caste 'mahajan' . In 'The Offspring' the helpless widow, Damyanti, who is by circumstances driven to sleep with another man, Pitambar has no child and keenly longs for one. Though Damyanti agrees to conceive for Pitambar - the childless father, she, a Brahmin woman, refuses to face the ultimate situation. The story reaches its climax when, on getting the news , Pitambar makes a bid in the night to dig up the fetus from the earth. As if gone mad, Damyanti cries, "Mahajan , why are you trying to ferret it out ? It is nothing but a lump of flesh" (50).

Her present story is very true to life. The central woman character - a helpless widow — is compelled by circumstances to indulge in immoral activities. For her daily bread, she sells her flesh but is unable to bear a child from the low- caste 'Mahajan'. As Namvar Singh, one of the greatest Hindi critics, in "Views on Indira Goswami's Stories" mentions:

I did not know that Indira Goswami is such a powerful storyteller. Her stories seem to have opened a new world for me. The finesse with which she has captured the Assamese way of life is notable. The female characters in her stories come across very strongly , be it Damayanti of "The Offspring" , Toradoi of the "Empty Chest" or Nimai of the "Beasts" - they all have a distinct identity of their own. Damyanti of "The Offspring" is strongly influenced by Brahmanical traditions but her decision to abort Pitambar's child underlines her determination. The facts that she engages in prostitution in spite of being a brahmin and yet lives a life of dignity is expressive of her strength of character (Singh : 2002 , 66).

Gynocritics like Robin Lakoff, have coined a special term "woman's language" and has also highlighted various characteristics of women's language. If we examine 'The Offspring' from linguistic model of difference, it is perfectly shaped into the gynocentric study.

Women writers are very much particular about the usage of words and don't pay much attention to the arrangement of sentence construction. As Patricia Meyer Spacks in *The Female Imagination* quotes Simone de Beauvoir and writes that "their [women's] vocabulary is often more notable than their syntax because they are interested in things rather than the relation of things..." (Spacks : 1975 , 19). 'The Offspring' is a perfect example to look into for notable vocabulary. Indira Goswami does not want to experiment with words. So, she has used many Assamees words directly into the narration of the story. These words are *halenchi*,



nalakocha, dhoti, chaddar, mekhala, mandhas gorapaltan, pucca, Boka Bhan, dhekal etc. Thus increased usage of the words of her mother tongue is clearly seen in her writings, particularly in 'The Offspring'.

Another important feature of women's language is that in comparison to men, women writers do not experiment with the style of narration. Their style of narration is generally conservative. In 'The Offspring', the author has followed the conventional tradition of narrating the story, starting from the beginning to the end of the incident. Here the story starts with Pitambar's yearning for a child because his wife is not able to conceive a child. His wife is "like a straw which may be blown away anytime" (54), and ends with the abortion of Pitambar's child by Damayanti. To quote this, the author expresses:

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. Oh, Pitambar ! Pitambar, she has destroyed your child (Goswami: 1988 ,60).

The third important characteristic of women's writing is that woman's language is marked by the detailed description which projects a clear picture of the surroundings. In the beginning of 'The Offspring', the author has given a detailed picture of the surrounding atmosphere. As the author mentions:

Heavy rain had soaked the ground and water had collected on both sides of the village. Half- naked children played in the water or stood here and there, fishing with bamboo poles in their hands. With the rains, there was everywhere a rank growth of all sorts of plants and creepers like halenchi and nalakochu. Flying frogs jumped from puddle to puddle and sometimes hit against the legs of the passers - by (Goswami: 1988; 47).

The detailed description of the surrounding atmosphere like this makes a long story. Many such detailed descriptions add up bulk of the story. Thus, the detailed description is another proof that highlights that Indira Goswami is charged with gynocentric sparks which shine brightly in 'The Offspring.'

The fourth important characteristic of women's writing is abundant use of metaphors and similes. As Malaya Khandu in 'The Touch of a Magical Pen' has mentioned:

Mamoni Goswami has the vision of a poet. One can see the poet in her in the description of events and settings. An extraordinary point about her writings is the visualization of similes and metaphors and the subtle use of nature as a background or setting for the emotion of action of the distinct class (Khandu : 1994, 73).

In 'The Offspring', Mamoni Goswami has used many similes and metaphors like "Sanskrit like Narahari Bhagwati" (49), "she was like a bundle of bones dumped in a corner of the bed" (50), "ailing wife" (50), "her eyes burning like those of an animal in a dark jungle" (50), "his wife lying again on the bed like a bird with broken wings" (52), "The invalid was lying on her bed like a corpse" (54), "you are prepared to many her who is like a piece of sugarcane, chewed and thrown away" (54), "your wife was like a straw which may be blown away anytime" (54), "the face looked like a fish caught in a net" (56), "mashroom coloured clouds shaped like a canon" (56), "The shape of her breasts would be like her soft rounded stomach of a pregnant goat" (56), "Shaft of her body like a tender bamboo shoot" (56). Such similes and metaphors sprinkle the entire story. As Namvar Singh in "Views on Indira Goswami's Stories" mentions:

Reading her prose one feels that there is a powerful poet hidden in her who comes up with new metaphors and images to give a new meaning to her stories. Her descriptions are so vivid that you feel that everything is happening right before your eyes (Singh : 1994, 66).

The opinion of gynocritics is that women writers have not been allowed "to fully use the resources of language, on account of which, they very often express themselves through their silences, gaps, euphemisms or by circumlocution" (Showalter: 1979, 4). Euphemisms and circumlocution used by Mamoni Ransom Goswami are immense. The incident of Damayanti's pregnancy is discussed in detail by the writer not as a straight, harsh critical statement about how men have exploited women but through circumlocution so as to soften the criticism she wants to launch. To emphasize, the writer has said:

Right now her womb is empty. It is not even one month since she has buried the evil fruit of her last pregnancy. Her tiny daughter said that this time her mother had used for digging the grave a crow - bar given by that student who goes to Sariali College on bicycle. He is a boy without character from a very rich household. During the college hours he used to go straight to Damayanti's place to hide his text books in the basket of rice. His college fees went for her cosmetics (Goswami: 1988, 54).

Language does not give women the right to speak directly against the patriarchal culture. A woman writer writes so because she is not allowed to use language fully.

In 'The Offspring', the technique of silence and gaps is used at its best by Indira Goswami to express the character of Pitambar's wife. The pathetic situation of his wife is excellently described by the author. She is "lying again on the bed like a bird with broken wings" (52). So she cannot speak anything to anybody, particularly to Pitambar - a male. She only gazes at him whenever she feels unhappy and uncomfortable. To express her pain and misery, Goswami quotes:



Her wife's eyes had followed his movements, expecting the medicine but now she closed them wearily again.
The fire in her eyes ... Ad extinguished, only the ashes remained (Goswami: 1988, 53-54).

Here, the "fire in eyes" is very symbolic which suggests the outburst of a woman against the patriarchal culture. Pitambar's wife, a woman, cannot speak against the patriarchal culture; she only gazes and bears the pain and suffering which her husband's decision about child brings on her. Thus, a woman's character in a woman's text shows how women are unable to express themselves fully and successfully. Their miseries and suffering are thus expressed through silence. No words can completely express the frustrations of a woman.

There are two female characters in the short story – Pitambar's wife and Damayanti – a Brahmin higher class prostitute. The condition of both the female characters are same. Both are helpless and become the victim of patriarchal dominance. Both live as voiceless entities. The only difference is that Pitambar's wife is helpless and behaves like a typical Indian woman while Damayanti by destroying the fetus of Pitambar revolts against the patriarchal dominance. The anger in the eyes of Pitambar's wife itself reflects a woman's anger against the patriarchal suppression and oppression. Out of helplessness, she becomes a caged bird of the patriarchy while Damayanti is a modern woman and openly protests against the patriarchal culture. Though Pitambar requests her a lot for the inborn child, she destroys the lump from her belly and frees herself from the shackles of patriarchal dominance. In that way, we can call her a "New Woman" whom the oppressive language of man does not affect. By destroying the fetus, she rejects the language of man and establishes her own language.

When we read the story for the first time, it echoes the voice of patriarchy. The fact is that women are born and brought up in the patriarchal culture. They are treated in such a way that they highlight the voice and views of the patriarchal culture. The author narrates, "So there is no hope of an issue, is it? Very sad, indeed. There will be no one to continue your family line? (1988 ,48)". She further says :

Ah! You don't have children. All your granaries are now overflowing with paddy. Who will eat them? And you are growing old. Now is the time to worship god and offer charity and alms (Goswami:1988, 53).

Though Indira Goswami has echoed the voice of patriarchy, the natural self of the writer begins to show its colours in the form of a woman's language.

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