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A detailed photograph of a quill pen resting on a scroll of parchment. The quill is white and has a dark tip. The scroll is made of aged, yellowish parchment and is tied with a red ribbon. A red wax seal is visible on the scroll. In the background, there is a lit candle in a brass holder and a glass inkwell. The scene is set on a wooden surface.

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Goddess in Exile: A Sad Tale of Female Existentialism

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The novel *Goddess in Exile* reminds of TS Eliot's "Waste Land". The novel's story is enmeshed in cross references, anecdotes, and mythical stories both from the Indian and western cultures. Yet a connecting thread of a woman's existential choice runs through the narrative binding it together. Just as the "Waste Land" offers a solution to the depravation all around *The Goddess in Exile* also has an embedded message for women to find the strength within them to free themselves from the exile of eternal servility and humiliation.

The story unfolds through the telling of Harsha's story. She represents the repressed status of women in a marital relation. Harsha's hope, which she realizes is nothing but eternal misery brings her to the decision of snapping all ties with her husband. Her husband was a compulsive alcoholic and treated her like a piece of furniture. She was totally disillusioned by her marriage. Though her husband was a renowned surgeon but he was an extremely cruel husband. He ill treated Harsha and she had to undergo a marital rape and physical violence whenever her husband desired. Life was a living hell with him. Even though her parents were aware of her husband's drinking problem, yet they got lured by his family status and promises made by his father of his improved behavior after marriage. They gave Harsha's hand in marriage because Harsha's grandfather had

wished it. The marriage was literally forced on her against her wishes. Her grandfather was a conservative orthodox Brahmin and it was his last wish to see her married. Harsha wanted to pursue her studies, wanted to prepare for IAS but her life was ruled by other people's whims and desires. She had no say in matters that concerned her life. She was assured by all that once she had a baby, things would be different and her husband would eventually find a sense of bonding with her. She continued to live her life in the hope of things to change and then she realized that the change has to come through her; not by waiting eternally for her husband to show some kindness. Harsha was burdened by the experience of anguish and solitude within the prison of her gender.

She tries to reach out to her parents but when she realizes that they are bound by tradition she has to leave her husband to find her future away from him. She is continuously plagued by her in-laws, parents and even her closest friends to reconcile with her husband. No one understands her point of view because in patriarchal society a woman cannot have a point of view. She takes a bold step of studying Journalism to live her life on her own terms.

When she meets Alberto a Portuguese philosopher, she finds her soul mate. He has immense respect and interest for Indian philosophy, her ancient history

and heritage. He is a follower of Buddhist religion. Alberto being a man has the freedom to follow any religion of his choice. Similarly, Sahoo appeals for freedom of choice for Harsha and millions of women like her tethered to patriarchal expectations where woman is given no right to choose. Alberto and Harsha initially exchange philosophical knowledge about various things. Their relationship develops over exchange of philosophical knowledge which is shared by them through a game of question and answer. "They were engrossed in a game almost as a routine for three months. A wonderful game indeed; they had already arrived at the threshold of a deeper region as if they had gone into it by peeling off the skin, layer by layer" (Sahoo, *Goddess in Exile*: 11). Philosophical discussions obliterated whatever difference that existed between the two. Their discussions transported them into a world where the lines of reality got blurred, offering the much-needed respite from solitude and anguish of reality. The conversations on philosophy, mythology and art kept them away from the sad reality of their situation.

Harsha had compartmentalized her life, her life with her husband was locked in a box which would open up whenever her parents called her, sad memories and the eternal waiting by the "south side widow" would bring sad reminiscences. "Harsha recollected the open widow on the south, the widow that was never closed. The same window kept her closed up inside like a photo frame. She had passed through many sleepless nights leaning against the widow." (Sahoo, *Goddess in Exile*: 67) The 'south

side window' which framed her existence becomes a metaphor that defines her life in exile and eternal waiting. Her meetings with Alberto were locked up in another box which she kept close to her heart and opened frequently. Initially their conversation never bordered around their personal past but love does creep into their friendship when Harsha unwinds her sad past to Alberto. The physical violence, marital rape suffered by Harsha at the hands of her husband had left her body and soul battered. She was desperate for a shoulder to cry her heart out and Alberto becomes the voice board for her. They share with each other their inner most distresses and wounds of the past that haunted their present. "Alberto had provided her peace and poise to her unsteady mind, a mind almost devastated by a violent tempest." (Sahoo, *Goddess in Exile*: 135)

Sahoo hints at the limited choice that is available to women in marriage and how women continue to negotiate their lives bearing the violence in silence. The novel hints at violence both physical as well as sexual against women that is not fully criminalized under law in our country. Sahoo's novels and the characters that populate them are 'real' to the degree that she observes society and records her observations in order to create awareness for certain social problems and to effect change. The story of Harsha is also the story of many women from India. The inner psyche of a woman is telescoped through the narrative technique of stream of consciousness by Sahoo. It lays bare the mind and soul of Harsha. The novel depicts the sordid realities of women married to violent spouses. Also according to Katrak:

As wives, women may subconsciously internalize sad-masochistic roles, and become unable to emerge from situations of physical and psychological battering. The main cause for their silence is the complex web of female socializations based on unequal power relations.... Given these layers of female willingness to participate in a male dominated model of marriage, women writers question whether such consent is an exercise of free will or whether it is the only option for most women in the cultures depicted (166).

In India a wife is constructed as an icon of submissive piety. The anxiety about family honour makes even the parents impose on her an entire set of oppressive social and cultural practices. Faced with an unending cycle of degradation with no possibility of escape from this exile, Harsha works towards her empowerment through education.

The narrative laments the dead end life of a woman trapped in a loveless marriage. It is an eternal tragic irony for Harsha and many women like her who undergo torture at the hands of their husbands. A woman is not the master of her own body. The female body is in a state of exile including self-exile and self censorship, outsidership and unbelonging to itself within patriarchy. The novel is a message for other women that they have to come out of this exiled existence. The Indian patriarchal norms rigidly situate a wife only beside her husband; hence even if she recognizes that

her life is threatened, she hardly has any options given social conditioning and censure. The experience of internalized exile unfolds as a process that includes Harsha's complicated levels of consent and collusions to domination which cannot be easily cast off. Sarojini is a progressive writer who has not severed her social responsibilities but she does want to draw the attention of the reader towards what is ailing in the institution of marriage. It is a gynocritic's effort to provide a corrective to the Indian code of righteousness. Maitreyee, Chaudhuri also opines in this regard that:

In India most of us find it difficult to tune in to the extreme individualism that comes to us through feminism. For instance, most women here are unwilling to assert their right in a way that estranges them not from their family but also from their kinship group and community. They want to ensure that their rights are respected and acknowledged by their family and prefer to avoid asserting their rights in a way that isolates them from those they consider their own. (31)

Sarojini's protagonists too do gain an insight into the workings and mechanisms of patriarchal dominance but are not able to subvert their situation. Sahoo validates Harsha's resistance to a life of subjugation and dominance. She is sympathetic towards Harsha which is evident through her narrative gesture.

Sahoo has the unique ability to move in between the worlds of mythology, philosophy and individual stories via her

creative voice and narrative. The technique of weaving mythology both Indian and western into the story line adds depth and universality of appeal for readers. It is like a collage presentation of anecdotes and mythical stories. Sarojini Sahoo as a writer recreates ordinary and unusual events of a woman's life with considerable imagination and artistry, using local folklore, myth and her considerable imagination and artistry.

Sarojini Sahoo is considered the Judith Butler and Virginia Woolf of contemporary Oriya literature. And yet for her, feminism is not just about battling male hegemony. For Sarojini Sahoo, feminism is linked with the sexual politics of women. She refutes the limits that patriarchy places on female sexual expression and identifies women's sexual liberation as the real motive behind the women's movement. (Parija)

The protagonist Harsha in the novel is neither a character larger than life nor a representative of feminist activism. She is a common woman; the delineation of the character of Harsha is a reminder that repression and marginalization of females has been a precondition of prosperity for patriarchal powers. It is the woman's body that needs to be liberated from the shackles of patriarchal codes of conduct prescribed for her sexuality. A woman in India has to surrender her basic bodily needs in the hands of patriarchal forces at various junctures. A woman undergoes male domination and subordination at every level of experience from the most obvious to the most subtle. Her body suffers malnutrition

when as a child she is deprived of nutritious food because the sons have to be well-fed in the family. Her body becomes a site of contestation when she is married; her body becomes a medium for begetting sons and if she fails to do so she is treated as a non-entity. Similarly, she is supposed to deny her sexual urge. Sexuality is the arena where patriarchal control is exerted most distinctly over the female body. It is either the overt domination as rape, or through a variety of covert control of the female body such as the tradition of obedient wife and self sacrificing mother. According to Jasbir Jain "The body needs to be recognized with all its desires and unconscious drives as much as the feelings and thoughts which inhabit the human mind.... Feminism is the recognition of this wholeness of existence that encompasses all three- body, mind and soul" (Jain, *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency*: 5).

Women writers like Sahoo have depicted through their artistic creations how women comply and consent to domination in marriage at all levels and internalize oppression. This toleration to domination may even be embodied as female responsibility as in putting up with oppressive marriages, complying with dominant spouses, even making the body available for other's pleasure. Sahoo's narrative is a counter narrative where Harsha decides to leave her husband after her encounter with what she believes is nothing short of marital rape and calls it prostitution. "There is terrible pain in the innermost corner of my heart. I feel the man does not find any difference between me and a prostitute."(Sahoo, *Goddess in Exile*: 89)

Although in traditional patriarchy this is hardly objectionable, Harsha decides to exert her ethical singularity by making this unacceptable as an act perpetrated on her female body. Socio-cultural parameters of womanhood are gauged through the narrative. Sahoo questions the cultural norms that consciously and unconsciously constitute an ideological framework that controls women's bodies. It is an artistic activism that enables a rethinking of dialectic relation between culture and power.

In Indian society, there is a grave dearth of options for a woman who leaves her husband's home; however apart from such objective factors are the psychological and subconscious holds of female conditioning through mythological stories and cultural norms that define a woman as not only belonging to her husband but as not having autonomous self that can make a life outside of a marital sphere. The consequences of stepping outside the boundaries established by the cultural code of *pativrarta* (literally translated: husband as God), can be served as in woman's ostracization in overt and subtle ways. Often, her parents, her only refuge, encourage a married daughter to put up with physical and emotional abuse, until sadly; she might pay the ultimate price of her life.

Harsha is unable to bear the repeated physical and mental abuse by her husband decides to discover a new life. Later in the novel when she meets her husband after a long separation she finds that her husband was still abusive, still inhumanly possessive. She can never forget her mother and father

for marrying her against her wish which explains her denial mode when her mother scalds her hands inadvertently. Dissatisfied with her married with no scope of improvement Harsha is left with no option but to move beyond her confines to seek answers to some inner yearning. Yet her past sorrows gnaw at her present, they cannot be erased or forgotten. The chaos in human relationship has been depicted in the novel through Harsha's disjointed marriage.

The novel is an intervention of an artist to restore order. "Thinking minds, especially in the modern times, are acutely conscious of the chaos and confusion lurking around, stemming out of a dehumanization and moral degeneration and have attempted to restore order and harmony through their philosophies or creative work."(Sahoo, *Goddess in Exile*: 5) Sarojini Sahoo's *The Goddess in Exile* is one such revisionist project. In the foreword of the novel, Suman Mahapatra writes: "It is really a paradox that in the midst of all the glow of growing civilization and refinement, at the societal front we encounter familial instability, domestic disorder and witness man degrading himself to the level of a beast."(Sahoo, *Goddess in Exile*: 6) The utter degradation of human character has been portrayed in the novel to attract the reader's attention for introspection. Sahoo presents a picture of the sad reality of a woman who undergoes marital rape too evoke a response from the reader. ". . . He went on biting on her face. He pressed his lips on her face so violently that her lungs were filled with the stink of alcohol. The man stripped her. But she could not cry aloud. She fell down like a leaf blown away

by wind” (Sahoo, *Goddess in Exile*: 145). Sahoo probes the issue of female honour within the institution of marriage.

“The writings of Sarojini Sahoo are a faithful portrait of the deplorable distress and victimization of the woman, a psycho-social reading of her sufferings and torture. For her, a woman is a respectable individual of God’s creation with her free will and choice, her own freedom and fascination, her passion and sexuality. She is never a person to be subjugated and suppressed. A free expression of her sense and sensuality is the basic tenet of a healthy atmosphere, any transgression from the basic norms and needs leads to deadlock.”(Sahoo, *Goddess in Exile*: 6)

Sahoo tries to disrupt the binaries be it East/West, man/woman, culture/nature as exemplified through Alberto’s comments: “Yes, the girls are a bit tender in heart. They are very kind. But I cannot cry before strangers. Do you know, Hana, sometimes I burst into tears while watching a film or a documentary! People make fun of me for being sentimental.” (Sahoo, *Goddess in Exile*: 15) Sahoo lays bare the real nature of human beings against the constructed gender differences that are prescribed for both men and women. These constructs bind both men and women into “prison of gender”; to borrow a phrase used by Carolyn Hielbrun in *Writing a Woman’s Life*. Patriarchy teaches males that violence equals strength and this adage, if negated by men in India, will not only help empower women but also

liberate men from the impediments of their self-created caricatured identity.

Sahoo contends that:

While the woman’s identity is certainly constitutionally different from that of man; men and women still share a basic human equality. Thus, the harmful asymmetric sex/gender ‘Othering’ arises accidentally and ‘passively’ from natural, unavoidable inter subjectivity. (Sahoo, *Sensible Sensuality*: 132)

The paradox of a woman’s predicament is portrayed through Harsha: “Your name means happiness, delight, pleasing, blissful.” But in reality Harsha is sad, surrounded and shrouded by sorrow. According to Alberto she has become a great pessimist and has developed a disinterested attitude to life at a young age.

Sarojini Sahoo’s writing attempts to create an alternate construct of woman to make her apocalypse the power within her. She also uses strategies of drawing parallel images or creating paradoxical traditional to highlight this difference. “The woman represents ‘Shakti’, the dynamic source of energy and creation, but in the present scenario, she is engulfed by sorrow and depression. The protagonist is a sad replica of the divine feminine, in perpetual depression.”(Sahoo, *Goddess in Exile*: 9) Harsha had become use to the sorrows that engulfed her constantly that she feels guilty when momentarily she comes out of this prison of depression. “Standing under the shower, she wanted to wash off her visibly

marked imprints of untimely luster and glow on her face. She wanted to go back to her old self, old Harsha, whose appearance was constantly engulfed by dark clouds Harsha stood before the mirror. In the mirror was the goddess of depression, half dead and half alive.”(130)

Harsha, who forbade him again and again, thought if Alberto arrived there at the moment, it would be very good. But the next moment, she was gripped with a sense of fear and shame. Moreover, she could not free herself from shackles of sense of sin. What was sacrilegious about it? Sometimes she became stronger, sometimes all her strength fell like a pack of cards. (Sahoo, *Goddess in Exile*: 47)

She was living her life in a prison of gender. When Alberto asks Harsha about her dream she replies, “I am terribly afraid of dreaming, Alberto. It is all darkness when my eyes are closed. Have I ever dreamed? Always only nightmares as though there is no respite from them. I want to forget my past. You may take it to be my dream.” (Sahoo, *Goddess in Exile*: 59)

“Alberto, I am not bold enough to do something freely transgressing the societal norms and code of conduct.”(Sahoo, *Goddess in Exile*: 61)

However her blissful relation with Alberto also did not last long. Alberto was in search of knowledge.

“Somehow she felt that Alberto belonged to nobody: neither hers nor of that

lady of Benares. He was thoroughly selfish because of his thirst for philosophy and acquisition of knowledge.” People in search of a goal are often lonely. “Harsha now repented that she had run after Alberto only out of deep attachment. But there was not much difference between that man and Alberto. Harsha was a plate of rice for that man which he would devour like a cow, and for Alberto, she was a book in which he would underline every page of it. Both would use her in their own ways. The truth remained that she was used.”(Sahoo, *Goddess in Exile*: 160)

She defines her relation with Alberto in a soul stirring poem; an excerpt from the poem summarizes the time spent with Alberto:

So many days we walked together I narrated my sorrows and you simply nodded. You were so hard beneath a simple ‘yes’. Had I known earlier, I would have enjoyed. The yellow birds on the boughs. The rainbow in the sky, the muddied small children.

After making an insurance of tremendous faith and hope When I knew That your pocket contains the plan of a future town.

With the address of motels and brothels I know that your new town is ahead. And you will be lost in the crowd, but you will carry with you my sorrowful story that I narrated during our walks together. (Sahoo, *Goddess in Exile*: 165)

Harsha in the end does not delete Alberto’s number from her mobile; this can be interpreted either ways: she wanted to

keep it as a reminder that she will not fall into another trap of being used by a man or to keep it as a memory of a relationship that surpasses the limits of temporal reality to be etched permanently and ethereally in her life.

Sahoo has elected to interweave fiction, mythology, politics and history whether personal or public in her writing to bring

forth women's issues. A politics of the female body involves the demystification of the several roles that reinforce control over women's bodies. This analysis of how women are colonized within their very bodies and of how they try to transmute the controls of their female bodily spaces from patriarchal hands into their own hands, offers significant knowledge to work toward broader changes in society.

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