

Predicament of Indian Widows in Indira Goswami's *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*

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Abstract. Women in Indian society have to struggle and are marginalized by the constructed social norms in the name of culture, religion and caste. They are made incapacitate in all aspects of social life and are compelled to live in internalized prison of marginalization. They are the weaker section of the society, their voice is unheard and untouched and they are kept aside in this man-made patriarchal set-up. Indira Goswami, one of the prominent literary figures in India has been an important voice in championing women's causes. She is able to reproduce the coarse conversations of her protagonists and her way of expressing anger at oppressive social customs is very subtle. The author has projected the plight of the marginalized widows and the catastrophe of their widowhood in her novel. Though her novels deal with North Eastern states in general, but her characters transcend the boundaries of place and become universal. *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* presents the true picture of the society of Amranga Sattra and depicts a real picture of the rituals, customs and cultures that were followed by the inhabitants of that society. The paper aims to highlight the fact how generation after generation the women were internalizing their marginalization and passively accepting their conditions as their fate.

Keywords : Religion; caste; patriarchy; widowhood; maliciousness; marginalization.

Mamoni Raisom Goswami, popularly known as Indira Goswami, the pioneer of the feminist Assamese literature was born on 14th November 1942 at Amranga in South Kamrup, Assam and died on 29th November 2011. She was the Professor in the Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies in the University of Delhi. She suffered from depression since her childhood due to the untimely death of her father and also her husband who died just after 18 months of their marriage. These incidents left an indelible mark on her already fragile state and she started writing, without which she would have been a dead person. She faced the life full of hardships and struggled courageously. The misfortunes of her life led her to be a maturer person and made her to look at life from a wider perspective. She has been the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Jnanpith Award and a number of honorary doctorates. She picked up the stories from her vast experiences and gave them life in her writings through a very sensitive and humane handling.

Indian women have always been viewed as the object of desire. They have always been considered as the backward gender and from ancient times they have always been seen as inferior by the patriarchal society especially in a conservative country like India. Though there is an increase in the empowerment

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of women, they are still considered as inferior to men. They are the victims of social oppression; their desires do not have social sanction, and consumed by the fire of unfulfilled desire they are finally driven to self destruction. The animalistic life that the widows are forced to live is hardly unbelievable- the death of her husband for which she is not responsible, brings to her unjustified blames and mental harassment. Through this novel the author wanted to depict the social injustice of the widows in a society which is steeped in orthodoxy and superstitions even in the 21st century.

The novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* was first published in the year 1986 in Kamrupi dialect under the title *Dontal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah* and was later translated into English in 2004 by the author herself. Though the novel is set against the backdrop of the feudal society and of a specific region the problems faced by the widows, the customs that widows are forced to follow are universal – they are even subjected to discrimination, disrespect and are given inferior status in society. The title of the novel is very symbolic which refers to the idea of strength. Howdah is a symbol of richness and grandeur of its owner which is placed at the back of the elephant. But now it is destroyed by the worms and the elephant throws it off and smashes it when he gets angry and tired of carrying the decorated howdah and at last the animal is killed. The title seems to signify that women are dominated and that are suppressed because of the regulations formed by the male counterparts. The novel narrates the story of Giribala who becomes a widow at a very early age though she wanted to transgress the norms set for women by the patriarchal society. As a widow from an Assamese Brahmin family, she narrates her experiences between two worlds – traditionalism and liberalism. The main problem that has been described in the novel is the exploitation of women folk. The novel deals with the three oppressed and victimized widows – Durga, Saru and Giribala. These three women characters who are puppets in the hands of the system have to undergo many strict rules and regulations like limitations in food, social contact, clothes and even they have to bury their dreams, desires and wishes in the heartless patriarchal society. Durga, the eldest of the other two widows surrenders herself to the system of patriarchal society, Saru feels a pure and divine love for Muralidhar, but is not brave enough to express her feelings. Giribala, the rebellious widow and the protagonist of the novel is not ready to follow the rules and regulations of male-dominated society where every time she is humiliated, oppressed, repressed, instead of that she prefers death for her ultimate freedom. Her husband had several affairs with other women :

I love women. I like their company.
(*The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, 510)

The line clearly explains that the man does not have any love for Giribala and they do have any happy conjugal life and for this whenever she reminds him only his illicit relationships and his characterless behaviour come to her mind.

The Hindu concept of marriage demands commitment from a woman that she has to be faithful, play subordinate roles, child bearing agency and remaining truthful to her husband to preserve the honour in society. She is not allowed to have any extra-marital relationship and she is excommunicated and ostracized. It is really surprising that a man may have a number of affairs but expects his wife to be a virgin. It is the dissatisfied picture of marriage and marital unhappiness on the part of women in the Indian culture which increases the pathetic condition of women. Marriage for a woman is a trap which negates her rights to individuality, independence and self-realization. For the sake of husband and family, she loses her identity and even her individuality as a human being. Male supremist ideology projects women as valueless who obtain value only by relating to men and have become victims of men's supremist ideology and their physical strength. The most charming and beautiful Giribala when reaches her adolescence period, her family forced her to marry Latu Goswami, a person who has no feelings, love and emotions for her. The male members of the family have decided their fate as women have no right to raise their voice. After marriage she was always humiliated by her husband and it was on her first night of her marriage she came to know that her husband had relations to other ordinary low caste women and the news completely destroyed her desires and dreams of her married life :

You will have to tolerate some of my habits. People say they are bad habits but you will have to accept them. (509)

After the death of her husband Giribala did not immerse the ashes into any sacred river and breaks all the taboos by eating meat. She hates her husband so much and his poisonous words made her a rebel against the whole patriarchal system :

There cannot be any enjoyment in bed with the woman one brings in marriage! Absolutely none ! Still I try to put flowers and Tulsi leaves on his wooden sandals. (562)

The novel deals with the deplorable condition of the widows of Gossain Brahmins. It also depicts how the patriarchal society frames iron rules to cage the women in the name of refined ethos of religious practice. Widows are bound to live as invisible beings as their appearance is considered as a misfortune or bad luck for others. But the protagonist Giribala did not want to live like a widow where rigorous routine of restrictions had to be followed as was expected by the society. When she returned to her in-laws' house, the neighbours and her community blamed her for her close association with Mark sahib. When she asked Mark Sahib to get her protection, she found that he was a coward who could not gather courage and so left her. At the end of the novel she finished herself in the fire of purification which symbolises a defiance against patriarchal establishment and orthodox norms.

The novel highlights the discrimination in the name of religion, caste and culture which are used as weapons of suppression, oppression and sexual crimes. The Indian widows are the most affected ones, especially the Brahmins who are marginalized lot like the Ibsenian dolls where society forsakes them and leaves them to their fate. The writings of Indira Goswami are just mouthpieces of silent lambs who are unheard by the deaf society. The cold-hearted patriarchal system driven by religious orthodoxy cannot support a woman without a male supervision. The novel portrays the darker side of life of the widows where nobody tries to fight against the evil customs and practices. Though Giribala tried to represent herself as an example of the concept of New woman, yet failed and died at the end. They all tried to create their own identities to become independent but all their efforts proved futile. Goswami's skilfully depiction of the condition of the widows in India makes the novel classic and a heart-touching work of literature.

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