

# THE WIDOWS IN SUBJUGATION: A READING OF DR. INDIRA GOSWAMI'S *THE MOTH EATEN HOWDAH OF THE TUSKER*

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**Abstract:** Women novelists in the post-independence Assamese literature have enriched the corpus of Assamese fictional world with their significant literary outputs by the inclusion of new themes and issues. Literature has witnessed the roles of women emerging through ages. Historically women have been silenced in history and literature. Women have been suppressed, oppressed, exploited and dominated culturally, economically and politically which positioned her as the marginalized. The women novelists have been consistently portraying female characters from different perspectives. Better known as Mamoni Goswami, Dr. Indira Goswami has largely been popularized for writing about the marginalized section of the society. Being a novelist from North East India, she has vast experience of the Assamese life and culture. Essentially a woman centric novelist Dr. Goswami's writings explore the plight and exploitation of the merciless women in diversified form. Dr. Indira Goswami's writings showcase the issues of the marginalized section and the nuances of their victimization. Dr. Indira Goswami's *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* projects the destitute life of the widows who are victims of both social and religious orthodoxy. The three widows as depicted in the novel become victims of male hegemony and social constructs. Dr. Indira Goswami demonstrates how society do wrong to the women and deprives them of their rights. The novel, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* is a brilliant exposition of the gender biased values and patriarchal morals which causes women's suffering.

**Key Words:** Women, Exploited, Widows, Gender, Marginalized.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Since the dawn of human race on earth, the role of men and women has been perceived differently by the society. Women have been suppressed, oppressed, exploited and dominated culturally, economically and politically which positioned her as the marginalized. The women novelists have been consistently portraying female characters from different perspectives. The changing roles of women, her repressed urges, her desires and search is nowhere better recorded in literature than any other literary forms. The real position of women in literature is a burning theme that finds place most in the contemporary literary discourse. Whatever the genre be, writers especially the emerging women writers have heralded a new vision by exploring the women centric issues and their world effectively.

Recipient of the Gyanpith Award, Dr Goswami is one of the pre-eminent contemporary woman writer of Assamese literature. Better known as Mamoni Goswami, Dr. Goswami has largely been popularized for writing about the marginalized section of the society. Being a novelist from North East India, she has vast experience of the Assamese life and culture. Essentially a woman centric novelist Dr. Goswami's writings explore the plight and exploitation of the merciless women in diversified form. Dr. Indira Goswami's classic novel, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, deals with the various social issues, social transformation and gender equality with an emphasis on the social evil of widowhood in the Indian society. The novelist holds up a powerful picture of change and transition, decay and degeneration which finds beautiful projection in the masterpiece.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

In *Indira Goswami & V.S.Naipaul's A Comparative Study in Historical Perspectives* opines that Indira Goswami's literary vision is all about humanity and she is a humanist writer. It is her imprint as an exponent of humanity which is shining with golden lustre. She is a sensitive writer who expresses attitude of equal estimation and compassionate towards the suppressed, oppressed, the exploited, the poor, the marginalized etc. While commenting on Dr. Indira Goswami's novels, Hiren Gohain has rightfully pointed out that, her writing is like a stifled cry of pain of man's inhumanity to man, which modulates sometimes into quiet bitterness and at times into

poignant pathos.” (*Ineffable Mystery* 140) Sankar Kumar Bhattacharya in his well researched article, Caste as Social Construct in Indira Goswami’s *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and *The Offspring* that as Goswami shows, the caste discrimination and untouchability go beyond simple purification rituals and becomes rigid in many cases that result in a sharp decline in basic human compassion. (17). Papari Das in her article, Germination of New Woman in the Fictions of Indira Goswami: A Study of the Characters of Giribala and Saudamini opines that Goswami has foregrounded the wretched condition of the women sustaining the patriarchal Brahmin society as a backdrop. (290) Dr. Doyir Ete in *Women’s Literary Space in North East Literature in English; An Overview* states that Women’s writing in North East literature also questions the established conventions of traditional societies and ways in which women negotiate private and public spaces that are empowering. (290)

### 3. METHODOLOGY:

The present paper tries to explore the condition of the widows in a patriarchal culture, their intense miseries and sufferings resulting from uneven power division in patriarchal society. The study is a literary one and it is both analytical and descriptive in nature. Both primary and secondary sources are used for the study. To make the study result gaining, various books, journals, critical reviews and related articles are taken into consideration with a close reading of the original novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of The Tusker*

### 4. DISCUSSION:

The novel, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* projects the plight and destitute life of the Brahmin widows in Sattrā - a Vaishnavite monastery in Assam. Set in Palashbari, the novel is an exploration of the traumatic plight of the three widows, Durga, SaruGosainee and Giribala who are caught in the web of a painful circumstance heavily chained by patriarchy. The novelist projects the painful existence of the widows in the Sattras who are marginalized and treated as inferior not only in religion but also from the patriarchal ideologies. Dr. Goswami describes the condition of the widows as they are like ghosts pretending to be human beings. About the novel, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, Rajul Sogani states that,

“As an artist (Indira Goswami) brings into sharp focus the pity and horror of their (widows’) situation and above all, the intense desire in each one of these caged birds to come out of its prison if not to fly, at least to breathe the fresh air of life and sing its own song. How long will society force them to languish in isolation or perhaps court violent and pre-mature death? The question is still to be answered” (Sogani 65)

Indian writers give various voices to women living on the margin of society. Dr. Goswami’s writings mostly explore the miseries and agonies of the women who are caught in the web of painful circumstance, often trying to establish their individualism within the orbit of familial relationship and society. As a true humanist, Dr. Goswami championed the cause of the downtrodden and voice seriously to reclaim the lost identity of the women who are seen as worst sufferers and victims of male hegemony under patriarchal subjugation

The widows in Dr. Indira Goswami’s *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* are victims of both social and religious orthodoxy. Widowed at an early age, all the three widows suffer immensely under the male hegemony and social constructs. Dr. Goswami has presented the angst ridden psyche and the assertion of the widows with a serious feminist urge. Durga and SaruGosainee exhibit themselves as meek and self effacing women though they are conscious of their rightful position in the society. Unable to register their protest against the cruelties of the patriarchal dictates they compromisingly accepted the societal norms. SaruGosainee is progressive to some extent and she exhibits her strength by striving courageously to create a separate space in the male dominated society. Banished from the Sattrā she faced the hard realities of life. The traumatic experience after her husband’s death has prepared Saru Gosainee to set another journey of widowhood.

As Indian society nurtures a traditional patriarchal outlook, women in fiction unquestionably get marginalized. Women in patriarchal society suffer not because they are part of society but because they are woman. In the patriarchal culture, women are subject to suppression, oppression and victimization both in the domestic and social spheres. Indian society, chiefly patriarchal in nature, always exerts influence in favour of the males and assigns submissive role to women as traditional housewife, mother and caretaker of the family.

Dr. Indira Goswami’s writings often showcase women’s miseries who endorse a confined and suppressed life in the male authoritative society. A socially conscious and committed writer, she has given voice to a silent majority subjugated and victimized by our society. A feminist icon, Dr. Indira Goswami acts as a crusader fighting against the ills of the patriarchy constantly campaigning for the emancipation of women by subverting the patriarchal prejudices. The novelist has infused a feminist voice in Giribala in her act of revolt against the existing social norms. Giribala’s

first sign rebellion is evident in her bold speech when she shouts at the women in rage indulging in malicious gossips. She says,

“I will live and have a better life than you.” (Goswami 28)

Giribala's fiery and bold assertion found brilliant exposition in her revolt against the cruel and torturous rituals at BangarSatta, her in-laws house and in her dreadful attempt to come out of religious orthodoxy. In sharp contrast to Durga and SaruGosainee, Giribala never exhibits herself as a meek character. The very sign of a revolutionary character and her withdrawal from traditional restricted life finds projection in her act of defiance in her refusal to return to her in-laws house after her husband's death. After her husband's death, Giribala is not prepared to return to her husband's family to continue the same traumatic journey.

Though the Indian Constitution has guaranteed equal rights and participation to women in all fields of life, in reality there seems a wide gulf between theory and practice. Women are always discriminated and dishonoured in the phallogocentric society. A culture which emphasises on the married status is deeply entrenched in patriarchal ideologies. It is taught to a woman that she is nothing without her husband. When her husband dies she loses her identity and becomes a non-being and useless. Rebellious by nature, Giribala strongly opposes such patriarchal dictates and never compromise with such restrictions imposed heavily on them.

Society imposes certain restrictive code to the widows. Though widow remarriage is accepted and the Indian Constitution has granted separate forceful act for it, still society is not in favour of glorifying such relationship. Rebellious by nature, Giribala strongly opposes to such patriarchal dictates and never compromise with such restrictions imposed heavily on them. The protagonist's assertion for her yearnings, her crave for a life of independence is strongly felt in her fondness for and her growing intimacy with the outcaste Mark Sahib. She was even brutally beaten up for continuing such free affair with the outcaste after her widowhood. She strongly detested the societal bindings by frankly admitting her interest and love for the outcaste, Mark Sahib when she says,

“I cannot just exist, just for the sake of remaining alive, like aunt Durga and Saru Gosainee.” (Goswami 168)

In the surge of literature, many women writers from the region have invariably articulate the female experience. Lerner while illustrating the significance of women's experience states that,

“Women have been left out of history not because of the evil conspiracies of men in general or male historians in particular, but because we have considered history only in male centred terms... To rectify this, and to light up areas of historical darkness we must, for a time, focus on women-centered inquiry... History must include an account of the female experience over time and include the development of feminist consciousness as an essential aspect of women's past ( qtd. In “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”, Showalter 339-40)

The novel, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* not only brings to light the pitied self of the three widows, but also throws light on the oppression of women, age old superstitions, rigid customs and traditions prevalent in the pre-independent Assamese society. The novel thus demonstrates the reality of widows and gives a detailed picture of discriminatory practices and biased attitudes towards widows which are still in practice or retained in the contemporary society. Dr. Indira Goswami's writings present how society do wrong to the women and deprive them of most of human rights. Giribala, the protagonist of the novel lodge her protest in a different way to assert for her rightful position. Giribala's protest is a revolt for the entire community protesting against the patriarchal system that favors men and causes women's subjugation. Contempt for rituals and her act of defiance exhibits her revolutionary nature challenging the strict norms set by society for the Brahmin widows in 19<sup>th</sup> century Assam. The harsh rituals the widows are forced to perform make them most vulnerable and deprive of decent livelihood. “Some customary rituals of widowhood are continuous fasting, following a strict eating regime which includes abstaining from cooked food and surviving only on raw food such as vegetables for days, sleeping on a bed of bamboos, wearing the areca nut tree's bark as one's shoes, bathing and undergoing more purification rituals of their body is touched even by the shadow of low-caste man, and so on” (Goswami 1). But Giribala defies such norms and rules strictly framed for the widows by the authoritative society. Giribala's non conformist attitude is well reflected in her act of breaking the strict brahministic rule of prohibition on consuming meat after accepting widowhood and moving freely with the outcaste which is not socially accepted and permitted in the patriarchal culture.

The history of women's journey has not been an easy one. Women are victims of patriarchy, male hegemony, social ostracization and hence she is “Otherized” clamouring for voice and individual identity. Kate Millet in her *Sexual Politics* asserted that, “patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger

society: a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole” (Millet 5). In a patriarchal culture, women are prone to exploitation and humiliation. And when it comes to widow, the situation becomes more awful. The linear division between men and women essentially reflects the power division attributing positive values and superiority to male and female as weaker sex. Within the dominant discourses of power, the binaries of suppressed and suppressers get pronounced. However resistance is the call of the hour.

Widowhood is not a choice but an inevitable part of life. The novel, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* presents the acute discrimination and the heart rendering plight of widows in the patriarchal society. The assertion of a desperate widow found brilliant exposition in Giribala’s fiery voice she raised against the ill practices and the social evils the society imposes on the merciless widows.

Literature of the nineteenth century reflected the changing attitudes and concerns of the intelligentsia. The women writers favourably responded to the change psychological realities and concentrated thus on focusing the women issues and their sensibility. Most post-modern Indian women novelists indulge in exploring the feminine consciousness of the women characters, their evolution towards an awakened conscience and how eventually this leads to the enrichment of their inner-self in a male -dominated society

## 5. CONCLUSION:

The novels of Dr. Indira Goswami truly demonstrate how society does wrong to the women and deprives them of most of human rights. Her writings expose the grim realities of Indian women and envisions a way to challenge the age rooted tradition which imprisoned women by various psychosexual and social constructs. The novel *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* thus celebrates the strength of a widow who transforms herself from a meek and stereotyped wife to a liberating woman who courageously raised her voice for her meaningful existence challenging the socially construct norms. The novelist through the depiction of the revolutionary character, Giribala, tries to highlight the independent existence of women and their effort in the journey towards emancipation and search for self recognition. The strong feminist voice of Dr. Goswami is a clear confession of rewriting history to bridge the gender gap created by dominant discourse.

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