

Plight of Assamese Brahmin widows as depicted in Indira Goswami's The moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker (Dontal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah)

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Abstract

The moth-eaten howdah of the Tusker is a novel written by Indira Goswami popularly known as Mamoni Baideo. Goswami's the moth-eaten howdah of the tusker deals with the life of three widows this novel, she writes about Assam Brahmin widows in the religious institutions of Assam called Sattr.

The themes are the socio-economic decadence of the feudal institution on the threshold of the independence of India. The satt radhikar Gossain Mahaprabhu's sister Durga, his brother's wife Saru Gossainee and his young daughter Giribala offer the different pictures of Brahmin widerhood. It is very alarming to note that the Gossain families which occupy the highest cast status in the society oppress its women. The status of women during the vedic is through the Aryan invasion.

Keywords: *Sattradhikar, Brahmin Howdah, Hinduism.*

Introduction

The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker is a novel written by Indira Goswami, popularly known as Mamoni Baideo. She wrote the novel in Kamrupi language. The book deals with different social issues of mid twentieth century Kamrup. Published as Dontal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah in 1986, it was translated into English by the author in 2004.

Indira Goswami's The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker deals with the life of three widows. In this novel, she writes about the plight of Assamese Brahmin widows in the religious institutions of Assam called Sattr. The novel had been anthologized in the Masterpiece of Indian Literature and has been made into a film called Adajya which won several national and international awards of film festivals. The settings of The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker are a Sattr in the South Kamrup District of Assam.

The plot of the novel revolves round the life of three Brahmin widows in the family of the Sattradhikar bringing out the superstitions, the abuse of power and oppression that widows had to confront. The theme is the socio-economic decadence of the feudal institution on the threshold of the independence of India, and the repression of widows in the orthodox Brahmin society. The influx of Communism and Marxist Ideology into the feudal system along with the plight of widows is the focus of the novel. The oppression of upper caste widows needs special attention as women of other classes seem to be far better off. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's remarks in The Awakening of Indian Women:

"Working class women, both rural and industrial are... comparatively freer than the upper-class women in India. Amongst the former, a woman being an earning member and an economic factor, enjoys a greater degree of freedom. Economic stress compels this class to be less trammled by severe social codes."

The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker revolves round the life of three widows: Durga, Saru Gossainee and Giribala. Indira. Goswami has written the novel in a very compassionate way. The three widows in the novel have varied experiences. The sattradhikar Gossain Mahaprabhu's sister Durga, his brother's

wife Saru Gossainee and his young daughter Giribala offer three different pictures of Brahmin widowhood. All the three have been forced to follow the restrictions imposed on them in the name of religion and Orthodox Hinduism as a result of the patriarchal oppressive practices. Their diet is restricted to boiled rice and vegetables. They are expected to spend their days in performing religious rites. They are expected to worship their husband's sandals as their ill-luck is supposed to have killed their husbands. All these restrictions are imposed on the widows to control their sexuality. It is tradition and custom for widows and unmarried young girls who have attained puberty, to control their sexual urges. Young girls were married off even before they attained puberty by the upper caste Brahmins. Giribala was married off to a debauched man, who himself broke all rules of caste and class, before she had attained puberty because of the societal and religious sanctions that her father had to comply with. Within the sattras, ancient laws related to caste and gender hierarchy that have been propagated and safeguarded by the male sattradhikars operate. Woman has always been in the margins enjoying only a peripheral role and hence was always subjected to oppression.

It is very alarming to note that the Gossain families which occupy the highest caste status in the society oppress its women. The plight of women in the Gossain families is worse than that of other lower castes as they are doubly oppressed when they become widows.

It is unfortunate that while a married woman has sanctity, a widow is considered impure. Widows are subject to inhuman treatment, physical abuse and psychological violence. The perpetrators of such oppressive practices are women themselves in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*. This has led to another dimension to view women as not only victims but also as the victimizers. These kinds of perpetrators are motivated by the family 'honour' and tradition which has always been expected as the duty of a woman to uphold. Giribala herself had to undergo severe beating, punishment and rebuke for 'flesh' as a widow. According to Partha Chatterjee, the strategy employed was to stress on the spiritual superiority of Indians by putting the onus on women to preserve 'tradition'.

Giribala's repression is the most poignant of the three widows as she is the youngest and hence, she feels the strength of her sexuality the most. Of the three widows she alone has not enjoyed conjugal love with her husband and is more aware of the system which has made her a victim without giving her any choice whatsoever in the matter. Giribala is physically attracted towards Mark, the British historian who is writing the history of the sattras. Indranath, Giribala's brother who supports the claims made by the Marxists, appears to disregard the problem of gender. Though Indranath encourages Giribala's association with Mark, he is absolutely inept when it comes to action. Mark as a historian has a change to bring out the oppression of widows and thereby induce change even in the community. But unfortunately, Giribala has to die a victim and Mark is forced to leave the sattras.

Saru Gossainee is drawn towards Mahidhar, a Brahmin who helps her in administering her lands. Yet neither Giribala nor Saru Gossainee is able to attain their desires and control their lives independently. Giribala's story ends in tragedy as she kills herself in the fire lit for purifying her after she is caught in the company of Mark. Repression has a disastrous effect when Giribala kills herself.

Mahidhar Babu takes advantage of Saru Gossainee's widowhood and tries to cheat her of her lands and money as he knows she would not risk her family honour. Giribala and Saru Gossainee become victims of a social order which puts enormous restrictions on women and tries to regulate their lives.:

Giribala and Saru Gossainee transgress the system overtly and covertly respectively while the third widow Durga has internalized most of the restrictions that she also represses Giribala. Giribala's father instructs her to follow Durga as her role model. Giribala is caught eating flesh and with Mar by the austere Durga. In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, it is mentioned that the Assamese Brahmin

widows are not allowed to take nonvegetarian food and if anybody does so, then it is regarded as a sin and they have to undergo some purification rituals determined by the society. It is believed that if a widow or a Brahmachari eats fish and meat, they will have to go through an eight dhanu prayaschita (purification rite for expiation in which eight quarters of a rupee and other gifts are paid to the officiating priests). If they eat masoordal, betel nut, white pumpkin, they will have to practice three dhanu prayaschita (purification rite for expiation in which three quarters of a rupee and other gifts are paid to the officiating priests). Durga chides Giribala for her behavior failing to realize that she herself is a victim like her.

Goswami records in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* that Assamese Brahmin widows cannot wear ornaments or flowers, perfumed oil or soap and cannot use mirror. They have to wear white dress and cannot put vermilion on their forehead. In Assamese Brahmin society, the widows were regarded as impure. It was believed that whatever the widows touched would become impure and nobody would use or touch those things again. The widows were not allowed to go to the kitchen where food was prepared for the family.

The Assamese society believed that due to the presence of evil stars, many unusual things happen in life as mentioned in the novel: Durga's mother-in-law suspected her horoscope and was sure that it had three paragraphs (evil stars). She was considered inauspicious because of the paragraphs.

People believed that a married woman should not touch a widow. If a married woman did so, then she too would also become a widow early. It is mentioned in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* that the Adhikar and rich merchants used to keep several elephants for their glory and pomp. These elephants did the work of timber pulling and catching other wild elephants in various mahals (depot) of south Kamrup. This was a respectable business, which the Adhikars used to run with great interest. In this process, sometimes they amassed great wealth.

Conclusion:

The role of women in the Indian sociocultural contexts has always been one of subjugation to her male counterparts. The status of women during the Vedic age through the Aryan invasion and advent of Hinduism leading to the pre- and post-independence eras would be mandatory to study the plight of the upper caste widows portrayed by Indira Goswami in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*.

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