

Perception of Feminism: A critical study on women characters in Jnanpith Awardee Indira Goswami's novel "The Moth Eaten howdah of a Tusker."

DR. ANUSMITA TALUKDAR

Former Research Scholar, Department of Assamese, Gauhati University, Assam, India

Abstract

The novel 'The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker's deals with the inhuman activities of the patriarchy on Brahmin widows through the character of Durga, Saru Gassainee and Giribala. The writer has explained about the pre-independence socio-scenario of Assam especially about the south Kamrup district. Saru Gassainee and Giribala to some extent try to raise their voice against the rigid norms of the society. But Durga completely follows the Norms of the society which is dictated by the patriarchy. The paper tries to look at to what attempts have been made by the patriarchal society to de-feminize and de-sexualize the Brahmin widows. Moreover the paper makes an attempt to analyze major factors behind women marginalization through the above mentioned women characters in the novel.

Introduction: The novel 'The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker's is written by Indira Goswami, popularly known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami in Kamrupi dialect. This novel expresses different social issues of pre-Independence era. And was published as Dotal Hatir Uhe Khowa Howdah in 1966. Later on in the year 2004, it was translated into English by the writer herself. The novel in general explores the socio-cultural attitude of a society which is now extinct, which lived in Satras. But the text of this novel criticizes the women's of these satras. This novel shows the inhuman, ruthless and cruelties of the society which they imposed on the Brahmin widows through three characters-Durga, Saru Gassainee and Giribala in an orthodox society. The story of this novel centers on the family of a Satradhikar in a small village, in the south Kamrup district of Assam. The title of the novel has a symbolic meaning. The elephant with tusks suggests strength while the howdah on its back hints at the eaten up by worms suggests the fading glory of its master. In different parts of India, Assamese Satras have contributed a lot to the religious and cultural life of Assam. The three victims women in the novel portrays three different kinds of images of a women in an upper-caste, rural patriarchal set-up. Durga accepts the norms of the society which is prescribed for the high caste Brahmin widow, Saru Gassainee fight against the male dominated satra system but still tries to survive within that system. But Giribala is totally different from the above mentioned two. Her violets all those rules on which she doesn't have faith.

About the Author: Mamoni Raisom Goswami is one of the most popular Assamese women writers who are popularly known as Indira Goswami who was born on 14th November 1942 in Guwahati. She spent most of her childhood at Amranga village in South Kamrup. In most of her novels, the Reader discovers women who are victims of social appression, whose desires do not have social sanction, and consumed by the fire of unfulfilled desire, they are finally driven to self destruction. Most of the characters faced extreme pain from the patriarchy which is against their dreams. Her autobiographical work 'Adhalekha Dostabej' (An unfinished Autobiography) explain about the pain of women which are against their wishes. The author had her share of unhappiness and suffering. As a teacher or as a social activist, by showing this kind of pathetic condition of the society she wants to improve the condition of the victimized women. Her married life was short and tragic one. She stepped into her first marriage against the wishes of her family and it broke up soon because of vehement opposition orthodox family. Once again she got married with Madhaven Raisom Iyengar, a young and

adventurous engineer who died in a tragic road accident in Kashmir after less than two years of her married life. Indira Goswami joined the department of Modern Indian Language of Delhi University in 1971 as a lecturer and retired as a professor from the same department. She was the winner of the Sahitya Academy Award (1983), the Janapith Award (2001) and principal Prince claus Laureate (2008). Most of her works translated into English from Assamese such as *The moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, *Pages stained with Blood*, *The man from chinnamasta*, *The Blue Necked God*, *An unfinished Autobiography* etc.

Perception of Feminism in the novel 'The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker': The novel explores complicated interior history of the Satras – which is explained through the lives of women. Most of them are deprived from all pleasures of life, though they struggled a lot to fight against the rigid system but still trapped under the nap of the patriarchy. It was very difficult for the Brahmin widows to lead a good life. Society restricted them from every kind on the diet, dressing style and movement of the widows, widows need to wear white dress.

Durga : The elderly sister of Adhikara who is a widow, after the death of her husband, in the family members of her husband's family harassed and rejected her by considering her as inauspicious. After that she has taken shelter in her brother's house but lead a very segregated life. Despite being a daughter and daughter in law of rich Satras, Durga's economic condition reduces after the death of her husband. Once she planned to go for a pilgrimage with other companions but lack of money prevented her to do so. So, in order to manage money she thought to give her ornaments to the pandas. When the pandas came to the village to collect money then immediately she rushed to that particular place where she had kept her ornaments. But someone had theft the ornaments. So, her heart filled with bitter sadness and was unable to go in that pilgrimage. And because of this grief her health deteriorated gradually and waits for the death to finally release her from her misery. She is also a stereotyped widow living the horror of an empty and meaningless existence in an orthodox high caste-Brahmin household. She is an uneducated women like others, Ignorance and superstition completely grasp her. She was unaware of the outer world. She doesn't allow a single speak of light and brightness to touch her bleak and barren life. At least she died of tuberculosis. Idler behavior with Giribala, her younger and widow nice reflects sadistic perversities in her. Once Gribala is bitten by a snake and Durga believes that snake has bitten her because Giribal helped the Christian and roam with him. Thus in the entire novel Durga represent death and decay.

Soru Gassainee : After the death of her husband, everything was divided and the Gossain has given her part. She represents an independent, self supporting women who in spite of social pressure performs the role of a man. She is completely different from the character Durga, though bath they are widow. She presents an image of attractive, glamorous and dignified woman. In order to help her in her household activity, she employs Manidhar , a Brahmin fellow in her house. Though the rumors spread in the Satra regarding their relationship, she just ignores all those false rumors. She used to look at mahidhar's dimly lit body. Though she felt ashamed of her thinking, but her heart doesn't obey the heart. Though she develops that kind of thinking, but at the same she controls her sexual desire. She reminds the touching of her ancestors. She is kin a conflict kinf of situation. Neither can she lead a life like Durga, nor like Giribala. But she too, ultimately emerges as a 'victim' of male manipulation and her own error of judgments. While she struggles with her desire, she was unable to understand the wicked mind of Mahidhar. Mahidhar takes the opportunity of her stellness. Mahidhar has theft all the ornaments of Saru gassainee and again he suspects some false notion of Saru Gassainee in th society. Finally, when the police shoot him because of robbery, and his body was taken into the house of Saru Gassainee. Then her affection and love for Mahidhar shattered within a

minute. In the novel we have the opportunity to see that she is that kind of women, who respect tradition but doesn't follow blindly like Durga.

Gribala : She is the only women dares to revolt against the system. She is the younger sister of Indranth, and is the youngest among the three women which is depicted in the novel. According to the pre-independence society, a Brahmin girl must marry a before she attains her puberty. Giribala was also married in a hurry to a sick man. He neglects her, humiliated her and spent his time with a theatrical troupe and with his low-caste mistress. After the death of her husband, the other family members tortured her a lot. And miscarriage she was sent back to her father's house. She receives tremendous pains in her life. And other women show their wages regarding the sadistic life of Giribala. But she doesn't give them a chance and lack herself in a room and said those women with 'Sindurs' that she will lead a better life comparing to those women. Her American Missionary Mark who is researching the history of the region and writing the biographies of other missionaries in Assam and gradually they develop a kind of attraction for each other. Mark has always conscious about his family reputation and his relationship with Giribala. Yet there are occasions when this consciousness breaks down. And because of her dead husband, she was debarred form taking food according to her own wish. After her widowhood, as her food was restricted to 'rice and pulses boiled with some vegetables, adding of salt, her tongue revolted and she consumes delicious meat curry in one of her family function. And because of this she has to gone through a long process of purification and faces harsh warnings. She has immense sexual desire and her senses are alive to all pleasures which body can offer. She hungers for physical and emotional love. So, one night she request Mark to thirst her both sexual and emotional desire. But Mark was aware of his limitations and resisted her to go back. But still she was not ready to go to her back which she considers like a 'graveyard'. Unfortunately, her family caught her in Mark Shabi's room and in order to purify her, according to the customs of the society, the construct a hut and she is asked to enter the hut and come out only when the ritual systems are over just before the hut is touched with fire. But to horror and dismay of the entire community Girivbala refuses to come out and fire engulfed her. She prefers death instead of leading a restricted or bondage life by facing humiliation and torture at each and every step.

Conclusion : From the above discussion it seems to clear that the novel talks about the economic independence of the women or about their formal education. Despite being a daughter and daughter – in – law of rich Satras. Durga faces extreme economic crisis after the death of her husband. And because of lack of formal education of Saru Gossainee, though she has the managerial skills, unable to catch the cunning of Mahidhar, her estate manager. She was ignorant about the details of her land dealings. And finally faced loss in the hand of the patriarchy. Again we explore that all the women's in the novel achieve dreams. They achieve only pains, suffering, domination and humiliation throughout their life. Although Giribal had a protesting voice against the system but yet she has to sacrifices her life for the rigid patriarchal norms. Actually through these particular women characters, Indira Goswami reflects the traditional and typical pre-independence concepts of the society which makes the life of widow women specially the Brahmins. Being a Brahmin girl see may face that kind of humiliation from her society. Society unable to understands the pain and suffering of the women. If a man commits any kind of crime then society will not accuse the males. But rather if a woman do something in order to satisfy her desire then society will consider her as a 'bad women' and she need to face different kind of harsh system which can purify her crimes. Since women are the creator of this earth, so we need to respect them. We need to give them space to educate them so that they can shine in their life.

Bibliography:

1. Bharali Hemanta Kumar, Mamoni Roysom swapno duswapnor diary, Chitralkha Publication, Guwahati 1, 3rd edition, May 2001.
2. Goswami, Indira (2002) 'An unfinished autobiography' sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi.
3. Goswami, Indira (2004) 'The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker' m Rupa & Co, New Delhi.
4. <https://journals.eduindex.org>
5. <https://rrjournals.com>
6. www.dimorianreview.com